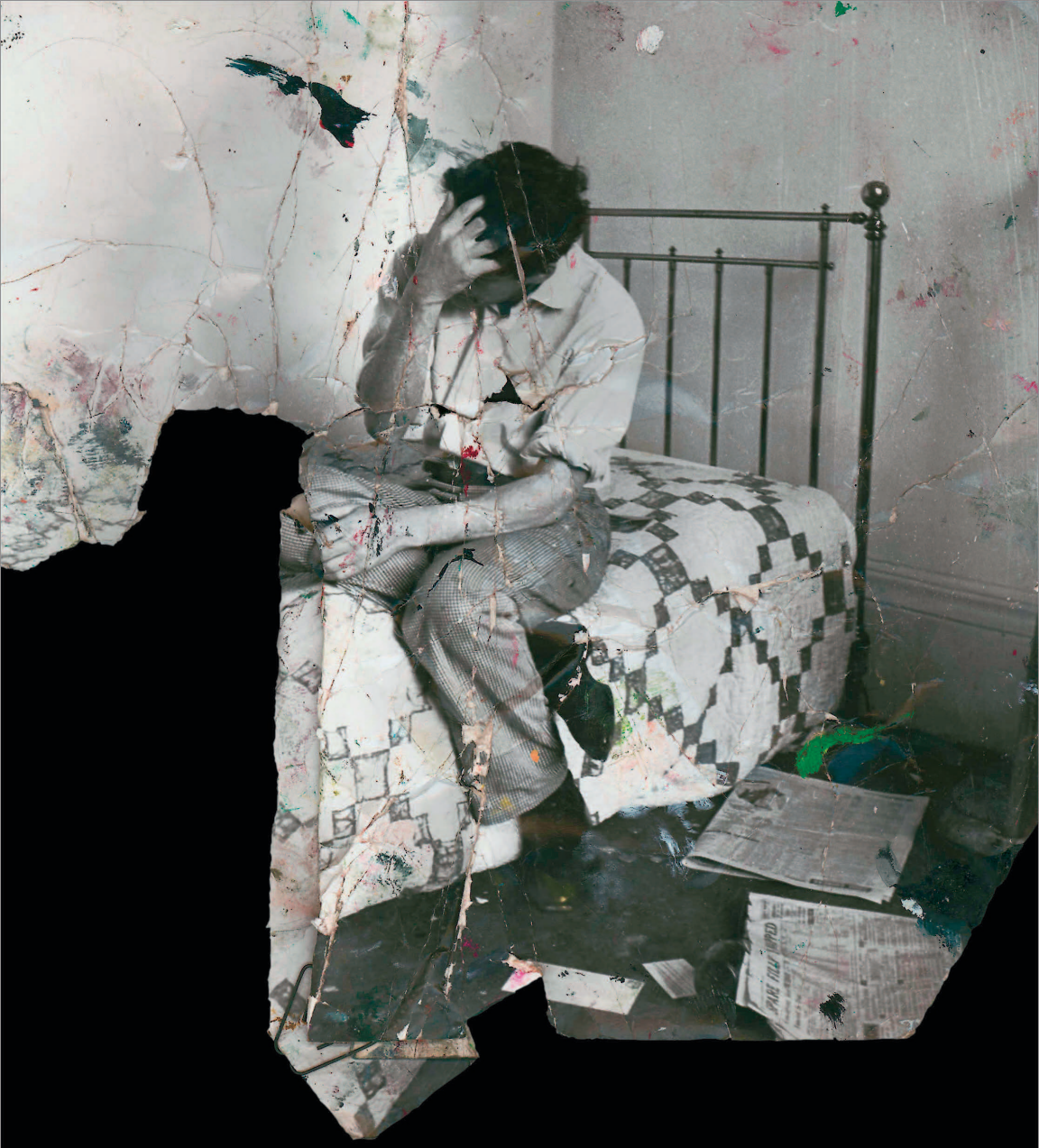

BRIAN PRICE

A THEORY OF REGRET

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A THEORY OF REGRET

Brian Price

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FOR ALEXANDER GARCÍA DÜTTMANN

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We do not see our hand in what happens, so we call certain events melancholy accidents when they are the inevitabilities of our projects (I, 75), and we call other events necessities because we will not change our minds.

Stanley Cavell, *The Senses of Walden*

I now regret very much that I did not yet have the courage (or immodesty?) at that time to permit myself a *language of my very own* for such personal views and acts of daring, labouring instead to express strange and new evaluations in Schopenhauerian and Kantian formulations, things which fundamentally ran counter to both the spirit and taste of Kant and Schopenhauer. What, after all, did Schopenhauer think about tragedy?

Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Birth of Tragedy*

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If you have encountered me in the last few years, you already know, I'm pretty sure, how much I appreciate Courtney Berger, my editor at Duke University Press. Thank you, Courtney. Many thanks are owed, as well, to Sandra Korn for all of her help.

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Introduction

REGRETTABLE POLITICS

This book is born of an effort to take regret seriously as a political emotion. It is also an attempt to understand the oft-professed absence of regret—the decisive moment in which one declares that one regrets nothing—not as a sign of virtue, as it is typically heard in boast, but as an expression of conviction. By "conviction," I mean a commitment to first principles, or the betrayal of human complexity and the diversity of life in the ongoing adherence to what we have only ever believed in one way. If I profess my conviction, if I give it a name, I usually do so when the corresponding signs of my belief—what I believe and what I want you to believe even more than I do, so that I am never left to doubt myself—have gone missing in the world. If what I believe is best has always been before me in the right way, why would I protest? The tautological character of conviction is such that its seeming and ceaseless relevance depends on the constant absence or presence of whatever this or that holder of conviction seems to prize most. In order to maintain my sense of conviction, I must remain unsatisfied and also always without remorse, so that my perpetual dissatisfaction can stand as proof that I have only ever been right about what I believe to be wrong. The political left and the political right are equally susceptible to conviction in just this sense, which can only name a perpetual absence that must be corrected by various means of insistence on what does not change, whether rhetorically, in the form of dogmatic speech, or else as real violence.

Is this not the lesson of Adolf Eichmann, the haunting advocate of the clear conscience, the most infamous opponent of regret? Recall Eichmann's famous declaration about regret, published in English translation in *Life* in 1960. The phrase, of course, has become a commonplace of popular culture: "But to sum it all up, I must say that *I regret nothing*. Adolf Hitler may have been wrong all down the line, but one thing is beyond dispute: the man was able to work his way up from lance corporal in the German army to *Führer* of a people of almost 80 million. I never met him personally, but his success alone proves to me that I should subordinate myself to this man."[1] Most striking in Eichmann's claim to have no regrets is the attendant admission that Hitler "might have been wrong all down the line," an admission he made, it should be emphasized, to a fellow SS officer turned Dutch journalist in Argentina in 1955.[2] That is, Eichmann was speaking to someone with whom he could trust to be already in agreement—not a reporter from *Life* but someone he was bound to by a shared sense of conviction. Likely, Eichmann experienced the feeling as an expression of duty. This is what allowed Eichmann, and presumably the Dutch journalist in exile, to recognize a right that did not diminish every other wrong so much as render those wrongs ethically irrelevant on the basis of what Richard Rorty has described, in critical terms, as a "preference ranking." For Rorty, preference rankings are what follow, in certain strains of moral philosophy, from an inability to accept that "the boundaries of the self are fuzzy and flexible," which leads moral philosophers—and also Eichmann, in no sense a philosopher—to draw lines around selves where there may be none and to develop systems "which divid[e] people up according to whom one would prefer to be fed first, for example."[3] What mattered most to Eichmann was the becoming-Führer of Hitler, the invocation of eighty million as a picture of consensus, and consensus as the becoming-arbiter of the Good.

Curiously, Eichmann's response in the interview unfolds in the rhetorical structure of a preference ranking in process. It is one that depends, as any preference ranking must do—and however tacitly it happens—on a consideration of potential regrets. If Eichmann begins the ending of his confession by saying, "But to sum it all up" (the clause that always goes missing in its everyday citation), it is because he earlier admits in the interview that he did, in fact, regret something:

> There was only one thing I regretted. If I had not been in a state of shock at this time, I would have done more for my wife and children. Unfortunately, I did not make provision for them ahead of time, unlike the gentlemen from the Intelligence Section of Schellenberg's, the so-called kid-glove boys in the S.S. I, too, could have had my family securely wrapped in a very comfortable cocoon of foreign exchange and gold. In fact, I could have easily sent them on to the farthest, the most neutral of foreign countries. Long before the end, any of the Jews I dealt with would have set up foreign exchange for me in any country I had named, if I had promised any special privileges for them.
>
> As it was, I was able to give my wife only a briefcase full of grapes and a sack of flour before going up into the mountains from Altaussee. I had also given them poison capsules, one for my wife and one for each child, to be swallowed if they fell into the hands of the Russians.[4]

There is, of course, an even more chilling discussion of regret, even if the word isn't used—chilling precisely as a testament to Arendt's well-known and controversial claim of Eichmann's stupidity in place of an idea that he was, by essence, evil. Save for the fact that what Eichmann appears to do in the interview is to invoke potential mistakes and begin to classify them. Even earlier in the interview, for instance, Eichmann reports that "Himmler went on to say that he had made some mistakes. 'I'll tell you one thing, Eichmann,' he said, 'if I have to do it over again, I will set up the concentration camps the way the British do. I made a big mistake there.' I didn't know exactly what he meant by that, but he said it in such a pleasant, soft way that I understood him to mean the concentration camps should have been more elegant, more artful, more polite."[5] Setting aside, for the moment, the odd assumption that Eichmann makes about the notion of a better—"more elegant, more artful, more polite"—concentration camp, what we see here is a steady movement from mistake (Himmler) to regret (about his wife and children) to the final determination that, in sum, he has no regrets at all (how could eighty million people be wrong?). In other words, Eichmann separates reason and emotion in the very act of establishing a preference ranking, so that what might have produced pangs of regret—his wife and kids with a bag of grapes and a pocket full of poison—is, for him, no real cause for regret at all, since the best thing that could have happened, according to his logic, happened. Eichmann's response is not so unusual in terms of the way that regret is regularly

regarded: as long as the best is realized, so long as virtue is achieved or observed, regret can be understood not as a response to a mistake but instead as a mistake in itself. It is the kind of mistake—perhaps the only of its kind—in which the consequences of that mistake disappear in the instant of its identification. For example, what Eichmann seems to assume, or simply wants his reader to believe, is that every choice comes down to an evaluation of the relative value of potential goods, which makes regret both possible and unnecessary at once, insofar as choice is never understood as something that we make without an enclosed, auto-democratic scale.

There is, of course, nothing terribly unusual about such an insistence on the separation of reason and emotion, especially as that separation is very often made in response to the manifestation of regret. The distinction is as common to Western philosophy as it is to Eichmann's special brand of stupidity. As we'll see in chapter 1, for instance, Aristotle considered regret to be useless to both the determination and the experience of virtue. Alternatively, one could argue against such a notion, as Janet Landman, author of a pioneering study of regret, has, and say instead that "regret is a form of inductive reason in that it proceeds from the given to the not given, comparing what is (a particular 'given') with what might have been."[6] It is the feeling of regret that cannot be separated from the act of distinction and comparison. Our thought is motivated, in such an account, by a feeling about something that has transpired and that we now revisit, rationally. It could also be said that regret, if we take the claim for inductive reason seriously, is a feeling that brings us back to reason. This is not so far from the way that the problem has been taken up in moral philosophy around the idea of rational regret, which in most cases involves the establishment of what should count as a greater or lesser good, so that we can say, without fear of self-deception or absurdity, that we have good reason to regret having chosen x rather than y.[7] Or as Thomas Hurka puts it, "The regret is rational as an instance of proportional love [in which we divvy up and rank our feelings in relation to the relative merits of each possible good, whether state or object, that will be included in decision], but like all such love it becomes less rational for more remote possibilities."[8] So, for Hurka, it would be rational to regret experiencing bad weather when on holiday, insofar as we will have missed out on an anticipated pleasure, but not more than one would regret missing out on the pleasure "you would have enjoyed had a stranger given

you a million dollars on the beach or had aliens abducted you and taken you to an intergalactic pleasure palace."[9] In other words, regret can be understood as rational if we retain a sense of the inherent value of things, on the one hand, and impose modest limits on our imaginations, on the other. But it is hard for me to imagine what good such modesty might bring, beyond the assurance it may provide us about what we have chosen to do or accept or else decline. If I am forced to imagine an intergalactic pleasure palace in order to understand why I chose to visit Seattle when I could have gone to Palm Springs, then it would be hard to imagine a use for regret in the world of political experience, or even, in the realm of the social, as it involves an experience with others whom we do not, exactly, comprehend.

By contrast, at the core of this book is an argument that regret is unconditionally transformative, and thus of no real import for reason. Regret is unconditionally transformative in that when I feel a pang of regret when revisiting an image or memory of something I have done and imagine how I might have done it differently, but without any definite image of what I might do next time, knowing what I now think I know, I do not project something because I feel I am in possession of nothing. And, besides, if there is a next time, it will not be the same time that has already passed me by. Regret is not restorative, just as we imagine paintings to be subject to restoration, inasmuch as we consider paintings to be things that can be cleaned or repaired in time or in the event of an accident (the risk of time): shown as they really were, shown now as they truly are. For instance, if I turn down my friend's invitation for drinks on Thursday night, after having done the same thing to her repeatedly before and for the same reason, she may decide to stop trying; she may cease to be my friend. A few months pass by and I realize that I have not heard from my friend. When I write and when I call, I receive no reply. I begin to feel regret. I begin to wonder about myself. I dwell on the event of our last moment of contact, which is also my most recent appeal to my supposed busyness. Now that I feel the loss of my friend, my work seems less pressing than it did before; or, at least, I can see that it was not so pressing in this one instance—not enough, as it turns out, to jeopardize a friendship I have valued, since for her, this one instance was yet one more instance of the same. In revisiting the scene of my decision, I imagine an alternative—I imagine what I believe would have been a better thing to do. I may even recall previous instances in which I responded in roughly the same way.

But I do not expect, as a consequence of what my regret now helps me to see, that I will have the same opportunity with the same person if I do now what I should have done before. I do not engage in these reflections on the condition that I will win this particular friend back, that my original image of our friendship will be restored just as it was, even if such a thing happens to happen. In all likelihood, this friend will have moved on, will have seen no reason to try again. In this case, which I take to be the more typical occasion of regret, I cannot enact a transformation in the same state. Rather, I become aware of my habit, of my inclination to deflect social obligations on the grounds of my busyness, recognizing that very few of us feel overwhelmed with available time. In attempting to mark my particular burden—*she couldn't understand how busy I really am, what it is like to do what I do*—I say of myself what distinguishes me from no other. I may not become a friend again to the one who has gone, but I recognize that in order to be a friend, I will have to address my habit of announcing my busyness. Even if my friend decides to try again, the friendship will look different than it did before. Likewise, I will take on a different image of myself for myself, even if I cannot say who it is that my next friend will be. If I can predict a friend, I will have no friend. In order to have a friend, I will have to be capable of regret.

If we imagine regret as something subject to proportion, indicated by it—to a divvying up of relative value across a range of possible actions and possible goods—I can easily see how regret, in my case, might be a reasonable thing to feel. But all that would come of such a response is the assurance that my decision was in fact a bad decision. *I really was a bad friend,* which means that I have been incapable of imagining someone else's experience from a perspective other than my own. However, if I can divide my feelings across a range of objects, states, or relations, then I will be noticeably involved in a preference ranking, which depends, ultimately, on the presence of a system or at least an ethos—on whatever it is that allows me to declare my conviction—that will ultimately negate the significance of the distinctions that I nevertheless make for the sake of comparison and decision. I tend to agree with Richard Rorty that the notion of morality exists—if it is to be in any way useful—as a way of explaining decisions that we make that seem to us unnatural, or at least potentially counterintuitive, as when I "feel an obligation to deprive both my children and myself of a portion of the available food because there are starving people outside of the door."[10] Morality, in this sense, comes

to define a duty I feel to others without having a picture of their particularity or a sense of their relation to me on the basis of something more obviously value-dependent than the fact of our shared need to eat. By contrast, "the term 'moral obligation' becomes increasingly less appropriate to the degree to which we identify with those whom we help: the degree to which we mention them when telling ourselves stories about who we are, the degree to which their story is our story."[11] In other words, if I identify as Christian and I help someone on the basis of their being Christian as well, then there is nothing moral in what I do. If I help an atheist on the basis of our shared atheism, then there is nothing moral in what I do. In order to determine the relative value of things in this way, I would first need to define the limit of a moral economy, the categorical imperative that follows from a question that really never is one: that is, what makes a Christian a Christian? What makes an atheist an atheist? Preference rankings. Having restricted the terms of a moral economy, I can establish related bureaus (categories within the category) to imagine levels of intensity or completion based on a difference that cannot be sustained as a difference precisely because difference is what the category needs and also needs to reject. By contrast, we might say that any morality worthy of the name does not prize conviction but instead its asymmetrical cousin, which is where or, better, *how* it is that one runs the risk of regret as the beyond of reason. It is beyond reason because it is without a picture or ready-made system of evaluation.

This is precisely what Eichmann failed to recognize. In his confession to a fellow Nazi, by listing a series of regrets, he comes to the rational conclusion that he has no regrets at all, since what he chose was reasonable, in the general economy of Nazism, to choose. As Arendt has shown, Eichmann defended his actions as the lawful observation of what was then the law (i.e., his claim to being a mere bureaucrat) and despite the fact that the persistence of this lawfulness would become the proof of the unlawful in time, since Eichmann will have felt no need to deny that he did what he was accused of doing, only *how* it was being understood in Israel, in a different place and a different time. Arendt said, "Eichmann, much less intelligent and without any education to speak of, at least dimly realized that it was not an order but a law which had turned them all into criminals. The distinction between an order and the Führer's word was that the latter's validity was not limited in time and space, which is the outstanding character of the former."[12] This difference—which Arendt marks as one that

exists between a response to an order and a response to the law—is also, I would argue, where we can locate a distinction between regret and its absence, between thinking and knowing. That is to say, any response to an order is subject to regret, to a feeling that occasions thinking, just where there had not been a sufficient amount of thinking before. Regret is, at the same time, adventitious to thoughtfulness, to a way of becoming responsive to things that may not be of concern to me—at least not yet, nor in memory—but that I take to matter in some way that I do not, or need not, fully understand as if it were my own experience. When thinking, I am thinking about something in particular, regardless of how clearly or distinctly said thing is to me at any point. When thoughtful, I am generally attentive: I look for nothing in particular but remain responsive to what appears. Eichmann appealed, instead, to knowledge, to established ways of being and doing, to a system of preferences that had become law, had become iterative. Eichmann hoped, as we know, that his will would come to be defined, paradoxically and in time, by a lack of agency that stems from the observance of the law. This is what made him, in Arendt's eyes, stupid. He deferred to knowledge, seemed, even, to believe in it.

We might say, then, that Eichmann felt no regret because he could not think, could only refer to the categories that were in operation when he acted. This is certainly Arendt's point. It also explains the odd response to Himmler: rather than take on the gravity of what had been done, take on the opportunity of regret for himself, Eichmann supposes that Himmler's mistake could only mean that the concentration camps could simply be made nicer, "more polite." As Arendt famously argued, one's capacity for evil is not an inherent trait, not even a capacity really, but an unwillingness (rather than an inability) to think. "The sad truth," she wrote, "is that most evil is done by people who never made up their mind to be either bad or good."[13] This does not mean, however, that they act without conviction. Rather, conviction is what follows from an inability to think, an inability to subject to constant evaluation in different terms what we profess to believe, and to carry on instead with the divvying up, by degrees, of the always already related. This is why, for Arendt, thinking has to be understood as a particular form of political activity, in at least two, if not many more, important ways. First, she says that "the need to think can be satisfied only through thinking, and the thoughts which I had yesterday will satisfy this need today only to the extent that I can think them anew."[14] In this regard, what defines conviction is the very refusal

to reimagine and redescribe the terms for doing now what we have done before. I take this point to be especially crucial to understanding why it is that we might want to carry on with a particular order of the social that we, as a political constituency, have worked so hard to enact, in place of an overestimation of failure as the key to emancipatory politics—an odd commonplace, in my view, of leftist politics. Second, thinking is political insofar as it produces a different way of acting, even if doing is what the activity of thinking cannot help but interrupt: "When everybody is swept away unthinkingly by what everybody else does and believes in, those who think are drawn out of hiding because their refusal to join is conspicuous and thereby becomes a kind of action."[15] This, it seems to me, describes the two main experiences of political life—the decision to carry on, which must be expressed as a redescription of the same, and the decision to dissent, at which point my thinking sets me apart from others. In being set apart by how I think, what I think becomes an alternative in which others can join me. As an alternative, and as a political expression, what I think gains its force on the basis not of what we have seen, but of what we do not yet know. The experience of regret is important to both options. If I stand out, and not because of the force of my thought but by way of its absence, I have the opportunity to return to what I regret having rejected. And in this sense, it makes no difference whether my rejection was a result of my passivity or of a decision I consciously made. The condition-less condition of my return is that I find a different way of thinking about what it is that I wish to continue doing, continue being part of; or else I return to and do better with it next time. In boasting that I have no regrets, I admit only that I am incapable of thinking.

For this reason, I am inclined to limit my theory of regret here largely to political considerations, with the hope that we can agree that regret is the experience we have of feeling compelled by a world and also, at times, mistaking that world, recognizing, in time—however quickly, however slowly—that worlds are made and sustained and in that way they remain unknowable in relation to first principles. One surely could, as many in fact have, write about more ordinary experiences of regret, regrets of a more personal, and sometimes trivial, kind. One such instance would be when we order a plate at dinner that we know we don't want as much as something else and it turns out badly, or when we decide to buy something that we don't really need and cannot afford—to state the more shallow instances of ordinary regret. Such experiences, I imagine, do have

something to teach us, but such decisions (and the regrets that follow) occur within very particular, and rarely transferable, economies of taste, in the first instance, or wealth, in the second, or sometimes both at once. They may matter, these regrets, but never to anyone other than the one who experiences them, or is implicated in the same relative and restricted economy (no matter how large it is). Alternatively, it is just as common, and thus much more important as a consideration, to experience regret in response to the death of a loved one, in which case our regrets follow from our reflection on what we did or failed to do before the end of the loved one's life. The regret that we feel in the event of the death of a loved one, which is often propaedeutic to mourning, is not as easy to disassociate from the political feeling of regret that I will be dealing with here, insofar as our feeling of regret includes the acknowledgment that the one who has passed is gone forever. So, in this sense, regret may, most simply—and also, potentially, most profoundly—be what reminds us of our finitude, and the finitude of every other, to the extent that a shift in how we perceive and act in the world changes in some way or another. Regret reawakens our thoughtfulness and potentially our moral sense, if by moral we understand our capacity to extend our care and consideration to beings about whom, and for whom, we have no picture at hand.

In linking regret to mourning, however uncontroversial such a suggestion seems to be at first blush, I am concerned to distinguish regret from melancholia, especially since I want to understand regret as a politically useful emotion. For one, regret is, in my account, not only an important political emotion: it is the affective registration of thought itself. As Freud famously argued, melancholia "is related to an object-loss which is withdrawn from consciousness, in contradistinction to mourning, in which there is nothing about the loss that is unconscious."[16] This is what regret shares with mourning, even if the two states must also be told apart: if I am in mourning, or experiencing regret, I know what has passed, what it meant to me (or at least, in the case of regret, what I thought it meant to me, and how I might understand what passed now), and also that it will no longer be as it was. And while Freud prescribed no time limit for mourning—it would take whatever time it took, and could not be controlled—it was understood to be a state that we pass through, precisely because we know why, more or less, we feel the way that we do, even if we are not in possession of an ability to bring those emotions to an end. In the case of melancholia, Freud argued that the patient "knows *whom*

he has lost but not *what* he has lost in him."[17] In a state of melancholia, at least in Freud's terms, and precisely as a pathological condition, I expect what has passed to return again and again, just as it was; and what returns as the same does so as both sign and source of the deep disregard I have for myself. Or as Eugenie Brinkema puts it, "Melancholia, in a sense, just uses the self up."[18]

In *The Forms of the Affects*, Brinkema has identified, with respect to Freud's distinction between mourning and melancholia, an important problem with attempts to understand melancholia itself as "the grounding disposition of the political."[19] Noting a tendency within trauma studies and the political valorization of loss as such, Brinkema describes a tendency in political theory to conflate mourning, which can be generative—simply because the work that mourning does is to deliver us, emotionally, from an absence, and a memory that gives an image to absence, to a state of being in the world in a different way—with melancholia, which blocks transformation. As she notes, trauma theorists have ignored, in the work of conflating the two states that Freud was careful to keep separate, the unceasing and expressly unproductive negativity of melancholia: "For melancholia in Freud's version of 1917 is anti-mediating: its stickiness to the past is precisely a recursive loop of painful attachment that cannot renounce, that never synthesizes, that is temporarily pathological for its expanded affective duration without end or change. It does not transform, and it is not transformative. Thus, a 'politics of mourning' that involves mediation requires a dialecticizing of that which is unmediatable in the original treatment of mourning."[20] It seems to me that our tendency to say we have no regrets, upon surveying aspects of our own behavior in view of a moral self-appraisal, is importantly related to an anxiety (whether perceived or not) that follows from the recognition that we have erred, in this way or some other, which will deliver us to the depths of melancholia. We also assume that mourning, which overlaps with regret as a reflection on loss, is merely a passage to the permanent condition of melancholia, the cursed mutuality of hatred and eradication of the self. And as Freud was careful to point out, mourning is not just a response we have to the loss of a valued person or relationship, but it follows, as well, from "the loss of some abstraction which has taken the place of one, such as one's country, liberty, an ideal, and so on."[21] Hence the political dimension of mourning but not of melancholia. So, if what I fear is the passage from mourning to melancholia in admitting to myself, if not also to others, that

I have been or done wrong, I am inclined to say that I have no regrets. If I have no regrets, I can forestall the permanent ruin that I perceive to follow from an admission of regret, which is something I know anyway but refuse to countenance, finally, for myself. I may even convince myself so thoroughly that I do not experience the early pangs of mourning, which I conflate with regret and also fear as a passage to melancholia. Even the most casual reader of Dostoevsky, however, will attest to the impracticality of that strategy. Eichmann, like Dostoevsky's underground man, obviously could not stop talking, which I take to be a condition of the denial of regret itself. One has to go on making the same case to oneself and to others, which suggests that in denying regret—in declaring that we have none—we do not avoid the non-generative repetition of the same that follows from melancholia, in Freud's account. Rather, we proudly arrive there by the very means of its denial. What we repeat and experience forever, in the professed absence of regret—as summary expression—are the very terms of our refusal, which take on a phenomenal aspect that will not change so long as we keep talking.

I will come at this problem in a different way in chapter 2, by thinking about the problem of advice—whether received from a trusted mentor or a bureaucrat, trusted or untrustworthy, upon whom we nevertheless depend—as the continuation of a way of seeing and being in the world that the mentor and/or bureaucrat extends to the one who seeks counsel precisely as a way of anticipating regret. I won't come back directly to the question of melancholia, since what interests me is the productive potential of regret, but what I say there about the experience of possibilization—when we experience the world and our way in the world as the result of a deference to known ways of being and doing—describes a non-pathological mimicry, and thus experience, of the pathological dimension of melancholia. Or at least, I am concerned to indicate what possibilization shares with melancholia as a form of repetition that prevents us from seeing difference in what repeats—which is akin, but not identical, to Freud's observation that the melancholic "knows *whom* he has lost but not *what* he has lost in him."

My preference, conceptually speaking, for possibilization in place of melancholia is in this very way motivated by the same political problem that Brinkema detects in the valorization of melancholia in trauma studies. Recourse to the possible—by which, in a more deconstructive tradition, which I discuss in detail in chapter 2, one indicates something

that has happened at least once and thus can be duplicated as experience—is a major, if often unacknowledged, trope of political theory. It is what happens when we bluntly project a previous political ambition, a previous version of the political as a desired ground for new and better social relations, onto situations that genuinely demand political intervention but bear little relation to the specificity of the events that gave rise to the political discourse to which we remain devoted and see as the right solution for nearly every struggle everywhere. "Historical consciousness" becomes in this way a euphemism for possibilization and conviction. It announces itself in the drawing up of parallels between one moment and another that, on the one hand, denies the problem that led to a failure in its original implementation (or characterization as record of historical events, such as when we say, too simply, that May '68 failed because there was no systematic plan in place for a new and more emancipatory model of social relations). On the other hand, it is also what happens when we fail to notice how the specificity of our own crisis is motivated by concerns and relations very different from the ones that animated the source of our sense of political identification and transhistorical affiliation. An example of this would be when we assume that the crisis of the university today is a symptom of both why the strikes of May '68 occurred and how the same conditions returned in enlarged form as a result of that "failure." Put differently, possibilization is an effect that follows from the submission of our politics to preference rankings, or else from when we derive our politics from them, which means that not only do we operate with a sense of the Good, but we do so as if it were essential in our case and inessential in every other case. Put differently still, as Jacques Rancière has, "what is proper to politics is thus lost at the outset if politics is thought of as a specific way of living."[22]

Such, it seems to me, are the problems that have beset radical politics for some time. In asking, as Lenin so famously did in his eponymous pamphlet from 1902, "what is to be done?" we all too often look to what was done at least once before, in which case there will be nothing historical in what I find and also in what I do. For instance, in *The Enigma of Capital*, to cite a prominent instance, David Harvey offers a variation that may not be a variation at all: "'What is to be Done?' cannot be answered, to be sure, without some sense of who might do it and where."[23] If we have a sense of who might do it and where, then what we know will have been decided strictly in terms of what has already been done at least once,

which becomes a model for recognition—and obviously without resounding success—since the once of doing could not have taken, even if we still think that it should have. Harvey's question is caught in a logic of regret misconstrued as melancholy, or the possible, insofar as moving forward can only ever be considered in a recurrent and never advancing relation to what has already passed.

Perhaps the most influential instance of historical consciousness as invocation and institution of the possible can be found in the writing of Marx and Engels. In their "Address to the Communist League" in 1850, Marx and Engels argue that the German workers must come to an understanding "as to what their class interests are, by taking up their position as an independent party as soon as possible and by not allowing themselves to be seduced for a single moment by the hypocritical phrases of the democratic bourgeois into refraining from the independent organization of the party of the proletariat. Their battle cry must be: The Revolution in Permanence."[24] In imploring the proletariat to avoid the "hypocritical phrases" of the democratic bourgeois, Marx and Engels offer a hypocritical phrase of their own: the revolution in permanence. If the revolution is permanent, then it will become the norm. If it has become the norm, it is no longer a break but an essential way of being. "Revolution" comes, in this way, to redefine the experience of contingency as necessity, in which case the temporal and contextual specificity of every instance of struggle is subsumed by the belief in permanent revolution, since if it is to be permanent, each revolution will be the same revolution. If melancholia has a place here, it could only be as that which enables the shift from contingency to the appearance of necessity in what remains, nevertheless, contingent. Regret has no place in such a scenario. If we feel regret at having been seduced by the "hypocritical phrases" of the democratic bourgeois, the conviction promised and rewarded by the phrase "permanent revolution" means that we will never make a mistake again. However, as I understand it, regret has something better to teach us about our political struggles, since its chief virtue, as I will describe in chapter 1, is that it is an emotion that reawakens thought and trains us, in this way, against an expectation that what appears will always appear in the same way; this means, among other things, that the very notion of permanence will always stand in opposition to politics and political struggle. In place of permanence, including the permanence of failure (which is also implied in the very notion of revolution), we are better served to think about con-

tinuity. Continuity cannot be sustained by something like conviction. It requires instead an attentiveness to difference, both in the phenomenal realm of ordinary life and in the imagination of our political values in a genuinely contingent way, so as to resist the impulse to render a contingent articulation of the social as something necessary.

INSTITUTIONAL ETHICS, ASPECTUAL RELATIONS

It is probably clear by now that the theorization of regret presented here will have little to offer, by way of support, to the impulse in political discourse toward universal claims about political action, such as we find in Marx's call to permanent revolution.[25] I am expressly concerned about the way in which the conflation of contingent acts with necessary ones—as in the call for permanent revolution—come to mimic, by virtue of an unchecked and unreflective sense of conviction, transcendental operations. That said, I am in no way opposed to broader conceptions of the political, and I consider the view of hegemony articulated by Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe in *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy*, and refined further by Laclau in *On Populist Reason*, a source of inspiration. I do not take issue, for example, with Laclau's notion of the equivalential relation, by which we are said to de-emphasize our differences for the sake of instituting, as an instance of the political (which Laclau takes to be a representational order), a new and contingent ground of social relations on the basis of something that we all want and that we believe to be missing in the social as we currently experience it.[26] And we do so despite the differences that nevertheless remain between us—in view, but de-emphasized for some time. The chief merit of the equivalential relation, as the basis of Laclau's conception of hegemony, is that it gives us a way of understanding how large-scale shifts in the social—whether as revolution or by democratic election—can take place without a conception and experience of identification, in which political affiliation is a zero-sum game: *I have to believe all of it or none of it*. What the logic of the equivalential relation solves, among other things, is the problem rightly identified by Jean-Luc Nancy as an "operative community," that is to say, an experience of community, or unification, that can only be achieved in and as death, since membership requires that I have every single thing in common with everyone else.[27]

The theory of regret on offer here does not oppose such macro-conceptions of political change as we find in Laclau precisely because the universal aspect of hegemony, conceived as an equivalential relation, is offered expressly as a contingent articulation of the social and refuses in this way anything like an adherence to first principles. One of the consequences of this, as we know, is that hegemony is not guaranteed to any one strain of political belief; rather, it describes how any popular political formation might come into existence. For example, while Laclau's conception of hegemony and populism has had a major influence on movements such as *Podemos*, it could just easily explain—at the other end of the political spectrum—the increasing success (at the time of this writing) of Marine Le Pen and the Front National in France.[28] This is not a weakness in the theory of hegemony; instead, it is a sign of its sensitivity to the complexity of real politics, which are only ever ill understood in moralistic terms like "permanent revolution." The contingent structures of political success regularly defy their content—or the specificity of each and every demand—as something essential to the structure itself. The demand matters, and it depends on the equivalential relation for its existence. However, no single demand can define, permanently or essentially, the logic of the equivalential relation *as such*.

In one sense, regret may very well play a role in the life of a hegemonic formation, insofar as it provides us with an opportunity to reevaluate our commitment, such that I might decide to emphasize something that I had de-emphasized before. Regret may be one emotion among others that helps us to understand when a particular social order has reached the end of its time. It may be that I come to regret privileging one thing at the expense of something else, which now feels more pressing. But I am struck, in this context, by a different role that regret might play in political theory and real politics, which will have a different bearing on macro-political thought. Curiously, Kierkegaard's brief reflection on regret in *Either/Or* indicates both what regret gives to thinking and how thought itself can acquire a political dimension, just not in every instance. Kierkegaard writes,

> Marry, and you will regret it. Do not marry, and you will also regret it. Marry or do not marry, you will regret it either way. Laugh at the stupidities of the world, and you will regret it; weep over them, and you will also regret it. Laugh at the stupidities of the world or weep over them, you will regret it either way. Whether you laugh at the stupidities

> of the world or you weep over them, you will regret it. Trust a girl, and you will regret it. Do not trust her, and you will also regret it. Trust a girl or do not trust her, you will regret it either way. Whether you trust a girl or do not trust her, you will regret it either way. Hang yourself, and you will regret it. Do not hang yourself, and you will also regret it. Hang yourself or do not hang yourself, you will regret it either way. Whether you hang yourself or do not hang yourself, you will regret it either way. This, gentleman, is the quintessence of all the wisdom of life. It is not merely in isolated moments that I, as Spinoza says, view everything *aeterno modo* [in the mode of eternity], but I am continually *aeterno modo*. Many believe they, too, are this when after doing one thing or another they unite or mediate these opposites. But this is a misunderstanding, for the true eternity does not lie behind either/or but before it. Their eternity will therefore also be a painful temporal sequence, since they will have a double regret on which to live. My wisdom is easy to grasp, for I have only one maxim, and even that is not a point of departure for me.[29]

For Kierkegaard, regret becomes a way of understanding how thought itself—and thus philosophy—cannot have a proper point of departure, or an essential ground, which is how philosophy as the identification of first principles so often proceeds. That is to say, if we are concerned (as Kant was, for instance) to understand the conditions under which the world appears as the prerequisite to a moral use of the will, such as we see in *Critique of Pure Reason*, a particular instance of thought—or the name we give to any beginning as *the* beginning—becomes the ground upon which everything else can and must be known. For Kierkegaard, then, regret marks the self-consciousness of a beginning that can be anywhere, and thus rightly belongs to nowhere in particular. To act at all, to make a beginning that cannot ever really be one—or at least a beginning that is also not an origin—is to become conscious of having made a choice that will not result in the mediation of what is not chosen. For as Kierkegaard insists, eternity does not lie after a choice or decision that we make, as heroic or teleological resolution, but *before* it.

Along such lines, Kierkegaard goes on to say, "Experience shows that it is not at all difficult for philosophy to begin. Far from it. It begins, in fact, with nothing. But it is always difficult for philosophers to stop. This difficulty, too, I have avoided, for if anyone thinks that I, in stopping now,

actually stop, he demonstrates that he does not have speculative comprehension. The point is that I do not stop now, I stopped when I began."[30] If Kierkegaard stopped when he began, which is what regret signals, he did so with the awareness that in beginning *somewhere* he produced a *something* that followed from this or that point of departure. Every beginning is a point of stopping that cannot help but continue exactly as it began. In this respect, every beginning would be something like an exergue, which Derrida describes in *Archive Fever* as that which "serves to stock in anticipation and to prearchive a lexicon, which, from there on, ought to lay down the law and give *the order*."[31] The exergue, Derrida argued, has in this way an "institutive and conservative function."[32] Whatever is placed in the beginning *as* the beginning will come to proscribe and arrogate to itself whatever follows, no matter how much or for how long.

And yet, in Kierkegaard's enigmatic passage, regret figures importantly not as a corrective emotion that moves us from wrong to right, in which case the choice we make would mediate its opposite, so much so that regret would no longer be possible or necessary. Rather, regret marks the very decision and distinctiveness of thought itself, its limits and also the potential of an alternative that is only ever an alternative and never the ground of being or knowledge as such. While Kierkegaard's litany of regrets gives the impression of nihilism, what the unrelenting negativity does instead is to refuse a dialectical conception of knowledge. If every decision warrants regret, and without exception, then each and every thought is followed by the affective registration of an alternative, of yet *another* place to begin. Thinking is situational, can and must begin anywhere, and will always be introduced to its limits, which means that no one thought will enclose or be enclosed by eternity, nor by mere appearance. Likewise, it should be said that "from anywhere" is not the same as "from nothing." What is striking about Kierkegaard's set of choices (if you choose *x*, you regret it; if you don't choose *x*, you will regret it) is that it also defines a set of limits that come to describe the possible terms of a choice that can now be made. And perhaps most importantly, the indication of the terms and limits that describe choice does not come with any indication of what a best choice might be. In this way, Kierkegaard's list of lists is a useful way of understanding choice within an institutional framework, especially since every institution is itself uniquely composed of a series of constitutive rules and concepts that are internal to that particular institution. Or as the legal theorist Corrado Roversi has put it, "In all of these

contexts [i.e., institutions], we must learn the relevant concepts in order to act meaningfully, and these concepts are *internal* in a peculiar way, in that for the most part they play a role only in the specific institutional setting they have been created for."[33] In Roversi's terms, any effort to determine the meaning or value of how one functions within any given institution cannot be decided—at least not necessarily—by larger social forms of valuation external to that institution, or what he calls "meta-institutional concepts." That is to say, what counts as a good or a bad move within an institution cannot be decided with reference to forms of evaluation that are external to the logic of that institution.

Why does this matter? For one, if we understand institutions as things that are constituted uniquely by rules and concepts they do not share with other institutions, there is no correlative logic beyond the function of the rules and concepts internal to the institution that would guarantee any particular result or content generated by governing structures, forms, and possible procedures of that institution. Consider, for instance, the research university. Let's say that one of my roles in the university is to continue to publish. In order to meet the standard of "research excellence," a concept and a language specific to my institution (even if it is shared by others in similar terms), I am expected to publish the equivalent of two peer-reviewed articles per year. The institution is predicated, then, on an assumption that each member's ability to meet this minimum will allow the institution to carry on meeting, in turn, a standard recognized by others, even though my institution determines those standards by itself and for itself. Since academic institutions comprise a variety of disciplines—some of which are necessarily unrelated, conceptually and thematically, to others—the specificity of what each of us who participate in the institution publishes can never be important to the functioning of the institution itself. It matters little to the institution if I publish a book on regret or a book on a French filmmaker, so long as an academic press that my institution recognizes as significant publishes my book. This is not to say that the content of the work any of us does, in this or that academic institution, does not matter. It is just that it does not matter to the functioning of the university as such. Rather, the specificity of the content of my work is what matters outside of my own institution. It is certainly the case, though, that how that content is received externally can increase or decrease the ease with which I function inside that institution, but even then only if that "success" is owed to a capability already

built into the internal logic of the institution in which I work. Indeed, this is one way of explaining how politically radical work—say, a book that calls for the forceful overthrow of every institution—regularly allows such writers to thrive within the very institutions that they nevertheless argue against. The popularity of such a work could very well foment a widespread revolutionary consciousness outside of the writer's institution while nevertheless fortifying one's place in that institution (and thus the institution itself)—that is to say, in an institution structurally similar, but never identical, to all of the ones described in that now widely circulated, influential work. And it would make no sense to describe such sequences as contradictory since there is no particular content demanded by the institution itself, only that the work be recognized by what the institution recognizes in turn, which is a form with no necessary content—but always *some* content.

In expressly political terms, then, this is why representative democracies are as frustrating as they are (or can be) vital, since the feeling of the former depends not on a dismantling of the rules and concepts that constitute a given form, but on a hegemonic relation to that form. If we return to Laclau's equivalential relation, then, we can see how the dynamism of any hegemonic order depends on the particular content that becomes appealing within a given institution. The affective charge of disappointment in one political order or another effects a change in content but not necessarily in the rules and concepts that constitute that institution. Of course, it should be said that Laclau's conception of hegemony functions just as well within institutional frameworks as it does in revolutionary contexts, in which one conceives of politics as a beginning from nowhere as opposed to the beginning from anywhere that would describe a choice one makes within a given institutional practice.[34] Regret certainly figures in both approaches. I can, for instance, come to regret my participation in an institution at every level, in which case what I do next will be a beginning from nowhere. What I do or what I build, in that scenario, will have no resemblance to the institution or institutions that I have forsaken in regret. I will say later what I take the limits of this approach to be. Instead, I am here mostly concerned to understand regret—whether in ethical or moral terms—as an affect better served by reformist politics, however unfashionable that may sound. Regret is, above all else, an intuition that comes too late—but nevertheless arrives—that we have not sufficiently understood the wider capacities of what we have already dismissed whole.

Thus, to return to the example of a representative democracy, any regret I feel on the basis of a decision I made within that institutional framework will not lead me to imagine an entirely different mode of political organization, just a different organizer. If I come to regret a decision I made to support one particular candidate, party, or social policy—and do not regard the effects of that bad decision as a result of a representative democratic system as an institutional form—I can emphasize more what I had de-emphasized earlier in an effort to make a change. As an affective registration of consciousness, regret—as a political emotion—contributes significantly to the dawning of a new aspect, in Wittgenstein's terms, or to a discursive shift, in the terms of Laclau and Mouffe. The aspectual and the discursive are important and importantly related concepts for this book. What the concept of discourse shares with the aspectual, in particular, is a refusal of normative epistemologies and an attendant recognition that an object only ever acquires meaning in relation to the social or perceptual context in which it operates. The meaning or valuation of an object remains independent of that operation, such that any object can—and likely will—acquire a different meaning in time than the one it has for us in the present, even if nothing in the object itself undergoes a transformation. For instance, in an early defense of their theory of hegemony, Laclau and Mouffe give the following example to explain how the aspectual and discursive function: "If I kick a spherical object in the street or if I kick a ball in the football match, the *physical* fact is the same, but its meaning is different. The object is a football only to the extent that it establishes a system of relations with other objects, and these relations are not given by the mere referential materiality of the objects but are, rather, socially constructed."[35] The distinction between a spherical object in the street and a "football" results not, as Laclau and Mouffe make clear, from any inherent feature of the object but by way of a hegemonic, equivalential relation that indicates a particular way of doing and comprehending what is done. This is also one reason that films come to take, at points in this book, a privileged status as examples, even if this is not a work of film theory, properly speaking, since the work of film is itself always aspectual. That is to say, how we understand a single image—one that does not change—will depend entirely on the shots that surround it. In Laclau and Mouffe's account of hegemony, however, we have more than just a relation between images. It is a contingent totality made up of linguistic signs (scoreboards, verbal commands, play calls) and non-linguistic signs (kick-

ing, goal-keeping, running), which frames our perception of the spherical object as a football and that depends in turn on our own de-emphasis of the "non-football" aspects that would, in a different context, allow us to apprehend the very same object as the equivalent of a freestanding stone lying in the road. In that case, I may carry on kicking the thing, but that kick will more likely signify my boredom than it will my participation in an actual game. But it is important to emphasize here that this particular sign of my boredom or else my role as player in a football game is subject to even more flexibility than Laclau and Mouffe themselves needed to indicate the contingency of "meaning" in any hegemonic formation and, ultimately, the contingency of the subject itself.

For example, in their explanation of the independence of the object from what nevertheless frames that object in a particular way, Laclau and Mouffe insist on the determining characteristic of discourse or the aspectual.

> A diamond in the market or at the bottom of a mine is the same physical object; but, again, it is only a commodity within a determinate system of social relations. For that same reason it is the discourse which constitutes the subject position of the social agent, and not, therefore, the social agent which is the origin of discourse—the same system of rules that makes that spherical object into a football, makes me a player. The existence of objects is independent of their discursive articulation to such a point, that we could make of that mere existence—that is, existence extraneous to any meaning—the point of departure of social analysis.[36]

Laclau and Mouffe rightly depend on a conception of the subject for the working of any hegemonic order and are careful, as we have seen, to indicate that those determinations are themselves contingent and in no sense necessary. However, of note here is the way in which these social relations—which are, nevertheless, determined aspectually or discursively in the constitution of the subject—take on the appearance of necessity. That is, one is either a player *or* an idler, despite the fact that one can be either at any time. In de-emphasizing this or that feature of my beliefs and desires, which also have a bearing on how the world appears and works for me, if not others, I occupy a particular role. I have agency in ways that are defined in relation to the system that has determined that role, even though it has done so contingently, and despite the fact that my embrace of this or

that social order is predicated on de-emphasizing whatever distinguishes me from others within the same set of terms that I have agreed to in being bound to others in a hegemonic relation. Within the context of political change, then, from an institutional perspective, we would have to say that the process of being determined as a football player (as opposed to a street idler) carries with it a presumption that one accepts whole the particular ways of playing within that very institution, and the difference is what is left behind precisely so this institution can become legible and, most importantly, work. In other words, we assume that the rules of the institution that have been constituted contingently—and owing to the determining character of the social relation that has taken aspectual hold—define in transparent terms how one plays the game or what exactly one's role in the game is. And yet what makes institutions so difficult to evaluate at the moment in which one contemplates the question of reform or revolution has everything to do with the difficulty of telling the character of an institution apart from the people who inhabit it in particular ways.

For example, must I give up on representational democracy simply because the rules that constitute it can justify an effect (for example, the refusal, as we saw at the end of 2016, to entertain a presidential nominee for the Supreme Court) that I strongly oppose? How can I be sure that the bylaws of an institution guarantee a particular action or outcome? Put this way, regret could, of course, eventually allow us to see that there is something wrong in the constituted nature of the institution itself and could provoke, on the basis of our disappointment with what we decided in error, more revolutionary forms of action and subsequent institution building. But regret may also be a form of aspect dawning, in which case my decision or action—which I now regard as a mistake—can shift. I might change my mind about how I will act within the institution. And if I have the ability to take on a different role or way of being within an institution, then I should also be able to see that the institution is more capacious than I had imagined at first. Thus I may be compelled to pause before opting out altogether, knowing, as I now do, that the institution is constituted by its own unique rules that are internal, and that the roles to be played (defender, center back, sweeper) are determined by that logic, and yet my identity is in no sense determined in an absolute way by those rules or roles. A part of the political utility of regret, then, has to do with the way in which it affords us the opportunity, in time and as a result of our own capacity to remain thoughtful, to determine what the limits of

any institution might be before we move to destroy it, especially since so many ideas about revolution are always already possible.

The scope of this book is admittedly much smaller than, say, a reckoning with hegemony, a theory of capital, neoliberalism, or, for that matter, communism—though none of those things is entirely off the table either. I am concerned instead to consider the way that regret allows us to understand our relation to the institutions we occupy and, most importantly, that we want to go on occupying, albeit with a better sense of what the institution at hand does and also how we might clarify our demands with respect to what the limits of an institution allow for in ways that are agreeable, if also never fully satisfying. It is my sense that when we speak in one way or another about burning down institutions, we typically mean the one that we do not occupy or recognize, for ourselves, as valuing. It seems to me that this has something to do with the fact that we expect our institutions as well as our reasons for belonging to them to be perfectly correlated and thus never a cause for regret.

BUREAUCRACIES

Given the institutional orientation of my theory of regret, the book is also a meditation on bureaucracy. For one, our confrontation with bureaucracy—if there can be said to be a typical character of the experience—is something that always occurs in medias res and very often leaves us with an unsteady feeling of regret. That is, when we come to the recognition of a problem that we believe to have an institutional history, or at least a series of related causes, we find ourselves before a bureaucrat, whether in the personage of a phone representative with whom I begin to dispute an erroneous charge on my phone bill, perhaps an immigration agent who can help explain why I have been categorized in one way and not another (to my detriment), or else a dean who comes to a faculty meeting ostensibly to seek the faculty's counsel on an administrative decision that has already been made—to cite a few ordinary examples. No matter the case, it seems to me that one of the most ordinary experiences of a bureaucracy involves what we take to be the presentation of disinformation in response to an irritable demand, our own, for clarification and reason. In our exchange with the bureaucrat, we hope that we will quickly be made privy in a clear way to the causal chain that has thus far eluded us

or the bureaucrat. We hope that we can restore what has gone missing just as we once knew it to be and that what gets restored—as this missing causal chain—will be indistinguishable from how we previously imagined it to be. Likewise, when most of us are greeted with what we think is disinformation at the moment we demand clarification, we often charge the bureaucrat with stupidity, on the assumption that he or she is either blindly following the rules of the bureaucracy or else is in ignorance of them. Whether we say so to ourselves or voice it to the bureaucrat, we get nowhere; we are sent instead to yet one more window, one more phone operator, or we are left with our own rage, which can only follow from what we take to be our conviction: we know, above all else, that we are right, just not why. That is to say, we believe that every institution is knowable in relation to what we take institutions, in general, to be. When we confront a bureaucracy, what we expect is a complete system of knowledge, either to be revealed to us or to be hidden completely if the answer never comes. Despite our tendency to regard bureaucracies as networks of dissimulation, we believe that the work of dissimulation itself—the shifting of appearance—covers over what can and must be known whole. We believe that the aspect change initiated by a bureaucracy covers over something stable and true, a real foundation. One odd, and also common, effect of this is that we regularly assume that the relation between bureaucrat and bureaucracy is a transparent one, that the bureaucrat is in full knowledge of how the institution works and what, precisely, their role in the larger working of the bureaucracy is, even if the bureaucrat's job is to prevent others from knowing how to navigate the institution successfully in the terms one expects in advance. This doesn't strike me as an unusual description of how bureaucrats and bureaucracies work, but it does not—as either idea or attendant attitude—stand as a proof of bureaucratic relations everywhere. There are people who can be described as bureaucrats whose job it is to prevent us from righting a wrong or merely clearing up a clerical error causing us some amount of grief; there are also people one can describe as bureaucrats who see it as their job to allow for a clearer passage through this or that institution, or even work to make the institution itself function better, more like the one we want to believe in and be supported by. It would be of no use, for instance, simply to complain about a particular bad administrator as proof of the problem of administration in general. Such complaints—however warranted they feel and sometimes, in fact, are—typically have the effect of ratifying the

very thing we most despise, since all that we are shown in such instances is what we have only ever believed in the first place.

What I am interested in here is what regret makes possible in these moments of institutional instability, which can be as productive as they are detrimental. As Ben Kafka has shown, bureaucracy is a textual phenomenon, a matter of signification, before all else. In his remarkable study of bureaucracy, *The Demon of Writing: Powers and Failures of Paperwork*, Kafka examines the "psychic life of paperwork."[37] Where others have only ever been concerned to regard bureaucracy as an expression of the repressive force of administration, Kafka has privileged instead—and without denying the repressive potential of any bureaucracy—the instability of writing as the stuff of bureaucracy, a textual undecidability on the order of Derridean *différance*, one that can loosen the grip of administrative power just as much as it can tighten it. Rather strikingly, Kafka notes, for instance, that the term "bureaucracy" emerged in 1764, in an issue of Melchior von Grimm's *Correspondance littéraire*, as a pun. Kafka writes,

> Grimm recounted [in that issue] how Gournay had once remarked to him that "'we have in France an illness that takes a terrible toll; this illness is called bureaumania.'" He even described this mania as a "fourth or fifth form of government, by the name of bureaucracy."
>
> This new word "bureaucracy" simultaneously invoked and violated a well-worn semiotic code. To the classic three regimes, democracy, aristocracy, and monarchy—that is, rule by the many, the few, and the one—Gournay had now added rule by a piece of furniture. The piece of furniture was expandable, metonymically, to include the men who sat behind it, the offices in which they found themselves, and ultimately the entire state apparatus. More than an ordinary neologism, "bureaucracy" was a pun, a "rattling of the semiotic chain," as Lacan says.[38]

As a pun, "bureaucracy" describes both order—the geometric regularity and categorical distinctiveness of each drawer that is nevertheless related to the whole of the desk—and the defiance of that order in the undecidability of the writing that gets classified there, and becomes subject, as Kafka importantly observes, to "the material and semiotic exigencies of *différance*."[39] As a pun, "bureaucracy" perfectly describes the difference between knowledge as a stable foundation beyond dispute and thinking as an ongoing process of relating what we see to material sources that

can never secure what any instance of signification features as a point of contact, as a proposed relation. A bureaucracy might very well be like an interlocking series of drawers beneath the desktop of a functionary, but only that. If it is *like* a chest of drawers, it is also never a chest of drawers; thus, how we imagine any relation of power and also our agency within that network of relations can be determined not by first principles, but by a capacity to think, by our faculty for analogy, knowing as we do that none of these relations can be held as permanent, essential, or merely beyond dispute. In this sense, which is what Ben Kafka demonstrates, the instability of signification can enable the binding power of the bureaucrat, but it can also unburden, by way of a different reading of the same mark, the one who has, up until now, been tracked and thus controlled in some way by a bureaucracy. Most importantly, what it suggests is that politics only ever takes place as a problem of signification that cannot be solved as a problem of signification, lest thinking disappear as a function of the solution offered.

Disputing Pierre Rosanvallon's reading of instances of French humor about bureaucratic struggle since the French Revolution, which Rosanvallon takes to be common expressions of the hopelessness that one has felt—and regularly still feels—in the face of this or that bureaucratic order, Kafka points out something more important about such tales: "The stories about 'bureaucracy' are not the signs of a failure of intellection; they are one of the forms that intellection takes."[40] This, in many ways, is where my own reflection on bureaucracy begins, and precisely as a related theory of regret. One of the main provocations of *A Theory of Regret* is simply to ask what happens when we cease to regard the bureaucrat as always already stupid and instead regard her/him as someone capable of thinking. Kafka's book provides a very strong justification for such a question. It is not that I want to argue that bureaucracy is always an experience of thoughtfulness. That would be absurd. I take it for granted that many bureaucracies produce the dissimulations or obfuscations that they do simply to carry on the work of accumulation and alienation that we often assume of them. This is certainly in line with how David Graeber has pursued the contemporary form of bureaucracy when he writes,

> In contemporary American populism—and increasingly, in the rest of the world as well—there can only be one alternative to "bureaucracy," and that is "the market." Sometimes this is held to mean we should

> simply get the bureaucrats out of the way and let nature take its course, which means letting people attend the business of their lives untrammeled by endless rules and regulations imposed on them from above, and so allowing the magic of the marketplace to provide its own solutions. "Democracy" thus came to mean the market; "bureaucracy," in turn, government interference with the market; and this is pretty much what the word continues to mean today.[41]

To be clear, Graeber is not honoring the distinction but reporting on what he takes to be a commonplace assumption about bureaucracy. His own view seems to favor the idea that markets and governmental bureaucracies are now more fused than ever: "This process—the gradual fusion of public and private power into a single entity, rife with rules and regulations whose ultimate purpose is to extract wealth in the form of profits—does not yet have a name."[42] Yet, whether one takes the commonplace assumption (should such a thing actually exist) that bureaucracies are governmental agencies that stand in the way of nature, perversely understood here as the free play of the marketplace, or one assumes that bureaucracies are the very way in which the marketplace becomes protected by government for the sake of oligopolies and radical economic inequality, one thing remains true in both accounts: namely, "bureaucracy" is simply the name for the "truth" of government and governmental institutions, which concerns its preoccupation with the maintenance and production of radical inequality. Indeed, the critique of bureaucracy is quite often a critique of governmental institutions as such. And yet, as Meghan Sutherland points out in "The Aporetic Apparatus," many international forms of contemporary protest are less inclined to call for an end to all forms of governmentality and governmental institutions than they are concerned with their better functioning. "Although it has become a commonplace of critical and cultural theory to treat the instruments of governance and institutional order as antithetical to and suppressive of any meaningful political activity—in other words, institutions and orders are what political dissent is understood to *de*stabilize, not the other way around—it is precisely such instruments and orders that concern the most fervent political demands of populations around the world at the moment."[43] As an example, she cites—among many others—the "You Stink Movement" in Beirut, which involved above all a demand for proper trash removal services, and the Black Lives Matter movement and its call

for police to "uphold their duty as police, that government institutions ensure the rights they promise citizens."[44]

One way of taking seriously the idea that it is not the absence of government that we need follows from the recognition that there is no bureaucracy *in itself*. If you fail to find a definition of bureaucracy in these pages, it is because such a definition could only ever work to produce a way of seeing, a mode of identification, which is precisely what we need to guard against and is precisely what we always accuse the bureaucrat and a bureaucracy of doing. If we think of a bureaucracy as something that moves continuously, then any given instance will never be well described by a list of stable, related conditions. If we take seriously the idea that the bureaucrat is capable of thinking, then we will have a way of keeping up with the bureaucrat where we might otherwise remain subject to an appearance that is only ever meant to cover over what the bureaucrat—if he or she is in service of a loathsome project—believes us to be too stupid to comprehend. If we are assumed to be too stupid to comprehend what the bureaucrat shows, then we will also be understood to be incapable of a meaningful intervention. In fact, it will be shown in chapter 3 that most emancipatory theories of thinking on offer in the continental tradition understand thinking itself as a form of withdrawal. What can we make of the fact, I will ask, that our most cherished theories of thinking as a withdrawal from appearance, from those of Martin Heidegger to Catherine Malabou, resemble our most ordinary descriptions of bureaucracy?

Regret, as we will see, also involves a withdrawal from appearance and one that gets caught up, at times, with what we so often wrongly describe as hypocrisy. And while I began this introduction by citing one infamous bureaucrat's claim for the absence of all regret, I did not do so in order to stage this inquiry as one that only concerns world historical figures and fascist politics. Every single one of us, I would wager, references regret whenever we want to secure an instance of dissimulation. For instance, if I do not want to go to a dinner party, simply because I would just rather stay home and watch basketball, I may send the host my regrets.[45] In this case, in sending my regrets, not only do I state, in the terms of a euphemism, that I cannot attend, but I imply in the same gesture that I am doing something that is, in fact, important, or at least previously agreed upon in a way that is now understandably binding, when in fact all I want to do is stay on the couch. I also presume, in the cover that my regret offers me as polite response, that my host would not understand just how

significant basketball is to me—that it is something that must be concealed about me if I am to be taken seriously and invited to such things again. Probably, if I send such regrets, I will also feel genuine regret about my minor act of dissimulation, about giving an appearance at a distance that can easily be read against my wishes (since we all recognize the trope as social custom), and also because it should be possible to tell my acquaintance that basketball, sometimes, is very important to me. And on a slightly larger political scale, I would say that until we have some better sense not only of *what* is important to us and to each other but also *why*, and of how all of the things we care about may bear no obvious relation to each other or to anything else, we will continue to substitute the voicing of first principles (the supposedly unassailable truths of the left and of the right) in place of genuine conversation, or at least, consideration for anyone other than the ones with whom we know we identify completely.

This is a political problem that can be understood, for many of us, in the experience of writing and of being read. One of the burdens of writing, as I experience it, involves a reflection in advance of what I might regret, having said *x* or *y*: *I've said this but does it make sense beyond the fact that it makes sense to me? How could this matter if I'm saying this and no one else has already?* Of course, the only way to solve that problem is to be sure that what one wants to say is said in a way that makes sense, precisely because it has been said before, or run the risk of the category mistake. Or else, if we believe that knowledge is the ground and aim of thinking, that knowledge is simply there to be discovered in the process of research, I can only wait longer—always longer—to say whatever it is that I will say, which I take to be a different kind of dilettantism, since thought takes time but cannot be completed, or given access to completion, in time. But if I heed such warnings—the very ones that I am first to give myself before I hear the same from others—what happens? One answer to this question is offered in chapter 2, where I consider mentorship to be a form of bureaucracy, and the answer, I'll say in advance, is "not much." Regret is one of the important things that the practice of writing has to share with the practice of politics, not to mention ordinary acts of sociability.

CHAPTER ONE

What Is Regret?

How many details, how many pieces of evidence, are required for one to know regret? Can one be punctilious in regret? To be punctilious is to act correctly. How careful can I be in my evaluation, especially considering that what is at stake—if I am experiencing regret—is the lack of care I once demonstrated that now has me in an uneasy state of searching? What would lead me to conclude that I am now more capable of seeing what I could not see then? I say to myself what everyone knows already, or could have known, should they be gathering the same details. *I can be wrong; I have been wrong: I regret that I am no longer in the right. I regret what is already known of me, what is known of me before I know it of myself.* If I regret something, presumably I wish I could have done something otherwise; I wish that I could have done the, or even just *that,* right thing. But if doing otherwise was an option—if every action implies an otherwise—then how could I have been wrong?

Regret is a problem of recognition as it emerges in relation to opposed wills, which cannot be communicated—which have failed to communicate and now remain in a state of oblique willing that only appears blank, in and as silence. One intends to be punctilious in regret; one hopes that the cause of regret can be proven or refuted. But if signs change—or remain the same in muteness—then counting or matching becomes sheer treachery. One can be exposed as having tried to do so, even as we fail to verify the terms of the regret that we now, however tentatively, feel. To try is already to have made a confession: *I should have done that differently. I have been seen, so I might just as well be heard.*

Regret is a problem of calculation, especially if we suppose regret to be the mischievous relative of virtue. I can feel regret and not be wrong—or else, I can feel regret and not be evil, since regret implies some relation to virtue. It is just that we do not know how to measure the distance between what we have said or what we have done and what would otherwise leave us in the Good.

THE HABIT OF VIRTUE

This is the problem of regret as Aristotle introduces it in *Nicomachean Ethics* as a question of virtue—that is, of what lies outside of the realm of virtue. For Aristotle, virtue is of two types: virtue of thought and virtue of character. Virtue of thought, Aristotle says, is something that does not come naturally. It has to be taught and it has to be learned.[1] We are "completed by habit."[2] We have to build our capacities for virtue, which will become our character, which is also the character of virtue, since it will be possessed by more than one. What this means is that the pathways for some things can be changed in the course of habituation, where other things by nature—by essence—resist. Like the stone: "A stone, for instance, by nature moves downwards, and habituation could not make it move upwards, not even if you threw it up ten thousand times to habituate it; nor could habituation make fire move downwards, or bring anything that is by nature on one condition into another condition."[3] If the raw matter of the stone in gravity prevents it from tending upward of its own volition—no matter how many times we toss it in the air—then the human, no less composed of matter, is the being capable of changing course on the basis of what can be produced as thought in the act of habituation. Of course, we might have to make the same claim for domesticated animals, for whom acting well is also a result of habituation, of a thought learned by rote repetition. Having acquired the character of virtue, the domesticated animal now—and no less than the human—has the capacity to pursue a more virtuous course. It can, for instance, defecate outside instead of inside, and largely on the basis of another's preference, presumably, rather than by inclination.

In this sense, the distinction on offer here between stone and being—whether man or animal—is obvious enough. But what it does, and rather importantly so, is to locate the question of virtue outside of a metaphysical

conception of morality. Virtue, for Aristotle, is something acquired, not necessary. We don't fall to the ground no matter what. Nor do we arrive with, or because of, the virtue of character. And while it might be argued that virtue may, in metaphysical terms, remain indiscernibly present in the Good, it exists as a category for Aristotle precisely because there are things that are—without question and for everyone—wrong. If this is so, then virtue, we will have to say, flourishes in the realm of the not so easily decided. And I would wager that for most of us this is a fairly common understanding of the term. Very few of us, I suspect, find the refusal to kill another human being virtuous. If the decision to not kill meets the criteria of virtue, then the impulse to kill—in almost every encounter—must be appealing to us, in some measure, as a possibility, as something that could be enjoyed, understood by myself and by others as acceptable even though I now find myself resisting the impulse. And if acceptable, it is merely less than absolutely right; if unacceptable, it is absolutely wrong.

Aristotle made a list of acts and emotional states that he considered simply wrong, that admit of neither appeal nor complication. One would expect virtue, by contrast, to be equally determined. And yet, for Aristotle, virtue is not a necessary condition, as are the behaviors defined as wrong. Virtue is contingent, even though virtue of character once achieved will come to appear and behave as a necessary state and will do so by way of the work of moderation that everyone who moves from virtue in thought to virtue in character inevitably embraces in the process of habituation; this process involves finding a state of moderation—a mean between total excess and self-mortification. Aristotle's list, then, includes only those acts and affects that admit of no mean.

> For the names of some automatically include baseness—for instance, spite, shamelessness, envy, and adultery, theft, murder, among actions. For all of these and similar things are called by these names because they themselves, not their excesses or deficiencies, are base. Hence in doing these things we can never be correct, but must invariably be in error. We cannot do them well or not well—by committing adultery, for instance, with the right woman at the right time in the right way. On the contrary, it is true without qualification that to do any of them is to be in error.[4]

If doing a base thing—even if we do it with great style, as Aristotle perhaps accidentally suggests that we can (the right woman at the right time

in the right way)—is true error without qualification, then we are left with an odd problem. Being correct is not the same thing as being virtuous, since having the character of virtue entails habituating ourselves to a mean somewhere between excessive vice and total self-mortification. If our participation in one of the base activities described by Aristotle were understood in relation to virtue, then we would be able cheat just a little bit (more than a glance, less than intercourse) so long as we don't berate ourselves for it too strongly. But for Aristotle, such actions and affects do not admit of variation or a mean. And yet one would assume that doing any of these things or experiencing any of these emotions—murder, adultery, envy, shamelessness—would produce absolute regret. But this is not the case for Aristotle, since virtue is always a practice of moderation and the establishment of a mean. Regret, then, can only follow something related to virtue, which is not a necessary condition. What this means is that regret cannot follow from something wrong, that is, from a failure to remain on the right side of an absolute. Regret, for Aristotle, only follows from a failure to achieve moderation, which is understood to be a virtuous, if habituated, act.

This leads me to wonder about the relation between virtue and virtuosity. The virtuoso has special skills, is in possession of more than mere mastery. The virtuosic performer, even though he is more than mere master of the medium in which he works, nevertheless excels within the realm of technique. Virtuosity is an achievement of the possible, since the possible is determined by the outer limits of a medium or a technical form, which was theretofore unforeseen even if always present as an option and is rarely achievable even once the conditions of possibility are exposed in the moment of virtuosic performance.[5] To be virtuous, in the Aristotelian sense, is to hold back; it is to do less than the virtuoso and more than the idler. And yet one finds in Aristotle's list of the absolutely wrong—and thus the always-outside-of-virtue—an experience of virtuosity: the right woman at the right time in the right way. Perhaps we will have to say, following Aristotle, that virtuosity thrives in the realm of the wrong. One can do something with great aplomb—better than others before you, even though the options you see, the loopholes you find, have always been seeable—and simply be wrong and as inimitable, as such, as the virtuoso.

Consider, for instance, the example of Herman Cain, a former aspirant to the Republican presidential candidacy in 2012, who was accused in

the middle of his campaign of carrying on a thirteen-year-long affair (a virtuosic act that exceeded its limits) with a woman in Georgia—Ginger White—who said of the affair, "It wasn't complicated. I was aware that he was married. And I was also aware I was involved in a very inappropriate situation, relationship."[6] In other words, she was aware that what she was doing was wrong. But if wrong, then she could—at least in Aristotle's terms—experience no regret. For Cain, by contrast, regret will not necessarily follow from the affair itself but from its exposure, which forces those signs to be understood outside of the context that made them possible as wrong and thus beyond, or perhaps it is better to say *before*, regret. The question for Cain is not whether what he did was wrong, but how the exposure of that wrong is to be understood in relation to his character. Now that the signs have migrated and have no necessary and animating limit, can he move from virtue of thought (from a recognition of the mean to be reached) to virtue of character, where that mean will become habituated as virtue? To do so is no simple task, since what such a move requires is the establishment of a mean constituted by non-necessary states and contingent signs; one has to move from a virtuosic performance in the realm of the all-too-knowable (because wrong) to a realm beyond the possible. Regret, then, will follow from the management (and thus from the possible mismanagement) of signs—both what I display to others and what I see, in turn, in the faces and discourses of others, knowing all the while that those signs are, in no sense, grounded, even if sense is what we rightly seek in them.

But before we go further into the question of the display of signs, we should know what actually constitutes virtue for Aristotle. Which actions and affects, in other words, admit of a mean, precisely because they are not absolute? Aristotle suggests a few, all of which are identified by the two related yet opposed actions or affects, all of which demand an experience of moderation that defines virtue in each case: pleasure and pain (interestingly, to be completely incapable of pleasure, according to Aristotle, is to be insensible—that is, incapable of sense), generosity and ungenerosity (where money is concerned), honor and dishonor.[7] Where anger is considered, Aristotle makes a distinction between an irascible and an inirascible person. And where truth is concerned, we are meant to locate ourselves between self-deprecation and boastfulness: "In truth-telling, then, let us call the intermediate person truthful, and the mean truthfulness; pretense that overstates will be boastfulness, and the person

who has it boastful; pretense that understates will be self-deprecation, and the person who has it self-deprecating."[8] One way of reading this proposal is to suggest that truth is always present, with or without the achievement of virtue. Seen thus, to be boastful is to obscure what nevertheless remains there amid the excess in any claim that may obscure it, however partially. Self-deprecation, by contrast, minimizes a truth that should be more properly exposed. Yet, since virtue is only ever a question of our response to non-necessary actions and affects, we are left, potentially, with a much more interesting prospect: namely, the idea that truthfulness does not exist outside of the experience of a mean, which will in any case be very difficult to agree upon. How will we find a mean if the set, by which any mean can be derived, is itself not entirely closed or even closable? We could, of course, imagine a contingent totality that makes signification possible, but how would one begin to quantify—even if only for the sake of a contingent formation—the distance between boastfulness and self-deprecation? What would a three mean? Would a seven, in turn, imply a tendency to boast but with the appearance of at least a slight inclination toward truthfulness? We are already doing more than numbers must when we begin to describe things this way.

NONVOLUNTARY AND INVOLUNTARY RELATIONS

Aristotle's solution to the problem was not to introduce the problem of data within a system of measurement, as I have—i.e., the idea that what we need to measure is immeasurable because it is ungrounded—but to introduce a distinction between *nonvoluntary* and *involuntary relations*, as it regards the achievement of virtue, or the experience of regret that follows from our inability to realize the mean. What concerns Aristotle at this juncture is the status of ignorance with respect to the will.[9] How, in other words, can we deem an action to be lacking in virtue if the agent does not understand what is at stake?

> Everything caused by ignorance is nonvoluntary, but what is involuntary also causes pain and regret. For if someone's action was caused by ignorance, but he now has no objection to the action, he has done it neither willingly, since he did not know what it was, nor unwillingly, since he now feels no pain. Hence, among those who act because of

> ignorance, the agent who now regrets his action seems to be unwilling, but the agent with no regrets may be called nonwilling, since he is another case—for since he is different, it is better if he has his own special name.[10]

"His own special name," it should be emphasized, is ignorance. If, in Aristotle's terms, I feel no regret about a particular action, then that action cannot be linked to a knowing use of my will. Whatever it is that I did, I did without the knowledge or information that I would have needed in order to intend to do whatever it is that I have done. Thus, whatever occurred was going to occur with or without my knowing, even if I exercise some degree of agency—if, that is, agency can be separated from the will. By contrast, if I now experience regret, at least in Aristotle's terms, I do so because I am aware that in the face of what occurred I was unwilling. Hence, it is *in*voluntary. If I was unwilling, then I was not in total ignorance of the potential causes of what occurred, nor was I ignorant of potential responses, each of which might blunt the cause of the event that now has me in a state of regret. An *in*voluntary action is a failure of virtue precisely because I refuse to exercise my will in the achievement of a mean. If I saw that it was possible—and indeed preferable—to do otherwise and nevertheless refused to act, then I am likely to experience regret. And surely regret, in this instance, will have the salutary effect of making me more careful in the face of signs and decisions to come.

Likewise, Aristotle's distinction between nonvoluntary and involuntary relations makes clear that regret can only be experienced in a situation where we are capable expressing our will, which we can only do if we are not in ignorance, that is, if we have before us information—signs that indicate possible causes and that can be described as possible because they are not necessary. These signs can be made to be otherwise if we see them as such and then redirect them. A nonvoluntary action, by contrast, implies that we could not have seen what was going to occur, nor do anything to prevent it, no matter what we do or do not do. In such cases, we might be sad about what has occurred, but our sadness can only imply sympathy or empathy, since regret implies a refusal of the will that now merits blame. In other words, a nonvoluntary act, at least in Aristotle's terms, might yield an emotional response to what occurred, but whatever those emotions might be, they cannot contribute to virtue, to a better way of acting in a situation that we have experienced once before.

But what if, in an alleged nonvoluntary relation, the signs that comprise causes and events—which either bring us to grief (whether in sympathy or empathy) or leave us indifferent (as Aristotle supposed)—are concealed from us? For one, we might be better able to see that nonvoluntary relations—the moment when we are genuinely incapable of altering or even comprehending our relation to what appears before us, and thereby assume that no willful relation is possible—occur more rarely than we suppose. This is especially true if we assume, as Aristotle did, that regret follows from our interaction with others rather than with objects or, at the very least, nonsentient matter. For instance, if a volcano erupts and burns my house to the ground, I may feel devastated, but should I feel regret? The volcano is like Aristotle's stone: it will do what it does no matter how hard we try to redirect it. I cannot regret the volcano, merely my decision to live near it. However, even this scenario is more complicated than it at first seems. For one, I might regret believing the realtor, who, eager to sell me the house, was all too willing to show me signs of confidence about the impossibility of an eruption. He might even have shown me data, produced evidence that it had been centuries since an eruption had last occurred, sensing all the while my eagerness to live with everything else that exists there: the trees, a view of the sea, my fantasies of solitude, whatever else I have revealed about myself in the hopes of becoming this other self that now seems only one more object away. But even so, it has to be said that I *could have* seen otherwise. There was, in fact, other information to consider. Concealment may forestall regret for some time, and also the response that my regret engenders, but it does not suffice as a mode by which an involuntary relation can be successfully converted to a nonvoluntary one.

This is the problem of describing a relation as nonvoluntary. Despite the fact that Aristotle makes the distinction between nonvoluntary and involuntary relations in the pursuit of virtue—and thus in the realm of contingency rather than necessity—the nonvoluntary relation takes on the appearance of a necessary state, much like the stone that will fall to the ground no matter how often we try to habituate it to upward movement. And it does so precisely as an aspectual endeavor, one that the realtor coordinates discursively and in a way that correlates the physical features of the home and its setting to an image, constituted by and as data, to the image of the home that I feature to and for myself. Because what is featured for me by the realtor is aspectual—and since the aspect

is correlated to what I also feature for myself—I simply take on, as true, an appearance that could be otherwise, even though the material basis of what is subject to decision or judgment in this case never changes.[11] It is only because what I desire is coordinated to what appears as unwavering (i.e., this particular house and that dormant volcano) that I could understand my decision as following from, even acknowledging, a nonvoluntary relation. In that case, I will, presumably, feel no regret—nor assign any blame—if and when the volcano erupts and my house burns down. One reason for this has to do with the constancy of the object (house, volcano) that is subject to, or beneath, aspectual relations. We assume, in such cases, that the relative constancy of the object, its inertia (supposing, as I do, that inanimate objects have no will, or, for that matter, that objects are inanimate) is independent of the effects of any relation that follows from an aspect that, by definition, results from the object *but does not inhere in the object*.

In this way, I am in full agreement with Bishnupriya Ghosh's critique, in "Governing by Wrong," of the tendency within human rights discourses to attribute wrongs only to actions done to human beings, which supposes—she argues—that what happens to objects never bears any relation to human life, itself a major ontological error. If that bias is maintained, human rights discourses will do little to redress the wrongs done to human beings who cannot but be affected by the objects that constitute being in often poisonous ways and that remain unobstructed precisely because they are thought to be without rights because they are inanimate.[12] My example of the volcano suggests one way of understanding the problem. If objects contribute to the constitution of being—and there is no reason to say otherwise, especially in the context of a theory of regret that bears a relation to virtue, which is, as we have already seen, a non-necessary state—then the idea of a nonvoluntary relation will be altogether appealing to both the one who wishes to deceive and the one who is all too eager to not know. If my house burns down, I shall only be able to blame the cosmos. I shall be able to hold no one responsible and also, by definition, I will feel no regret. If I were capable of feeling regret, I might be made more alert to future alternatives, even as I find myself in steady pursuit of a particular object or place and a particular understanding of that object or place. The absence of regret in the face of a supposed nonvoluntary relation can only, in this sense, fortify a perceptual habit that prevents me from seeing ahead of, or behind, what appears, which

is what I shall need to be able to do if I am going to make good—nay, *any*—use of my will. In such an instance, my refusal to see the aspect *as* an aspect and thereby conflate the aspect and the object as a given becomes the basis for what I wrongly perceive as a nonvoluntary relation. It is also how I prevent myself from seeing that my advisor (in this case, the realtor)—while not necessarily intent on doing me wrong, or at least wholly so—simply forecloses for him- or herself the possibility that they be recognized *as also* my adversary and be held accountable, as a result, for what they have merely failed to recognize, or else deliberately covered over in an effort to feature for me what it is that I featured for myself. The reason for this is that aspects can be coordinated and sustained in and as the same image by conflicting interests: profit, in the case of the realtor, and a desire for the perfect home, in the case of the buyer. We can say this is so largely because what "agrees" most visibly, in such instances, is the constancy of the object, whether in its independence from the aspect or as a result of the coordination of aspects on the basis of competing interests that depend on agreement.

That competing interests could constitute and also sustain the same aspect may seem strange to political theory, but one example of its ordinariness—that is to say, of its regularity in psychic and institutional existence—can be detected in film production. It is in no way uncommon for a producer of a film to have different reasons for wanting to produce, and indeed create the conditions for the actual production of, an image at odds with the reason that a director maintains in order to produce that very same image. For example, imagine a producer and director wanting to make yet one more Godzilla film. The producer's reason for doing so is that there is a long history of profit following from the production of Godzilla films. So, for the producer, more of the same image is more money. Thus, said producer needs the new image of Godzilla to look significantly like the images of other Godzillas in order to secure a market for the film to come, likelihood of remuneration at a minimum, and profit. The director, on the other hand, agrees to the conditions of production—to the institution of "Hollywood" filmmaking as such—because films are expensive to make on that scale, and also because said director wants to be understood as making an intervention in the history of film. Of course, the latter concern is more a matter of art historical record and critical recognition than fiscal ingenuity, even if those things are also difficult, at times, to separate. But in order for both the producer and the director to

be satisfied, they will both need, at the level of the image, to share (and in this way, accomplish) the same thing: an image of Godzilla that looks like what we have come to recognize, aspectually, as Godzilla and not something else. This happens despite the fact that *what* they share (the image of Godzilla) is potentially different from *why* they share it: the producer wants profit; the director wants cinematic prestige, which includes the ability, always, to make yet another film. At one level, then, the motives of the producer and the director are importantly not so different, insofar as both participate in the same institution of commercial filmmaking. But it could also become the case that the producer demands aesthetic changes for the perceived purpose of a market (which is something that he cannot know but only predict on the basis of what came before), changes the director must accept and implement, even if those changes, in his view, threaten his critical recognition as an artist and potentially—if also for different reasons—his future participation in the institution of commercial film production. In terms of my argument, then, what matters most—or at least, first—is that the image of Godzilla exists and that it does so despite the different reasons for doing so. Both the producer and the director share an aspect—they feature a beast that we are intended to recognize as Godzilla—even if the director feels duped into this or that part of the image, comes to regret the working relationship with the producer, and vows to never do it again. He might even make another Godzilla film with someone else. What we can say about filmmaking and the conflict of interests that regularly happen there, we can also say about how we experience different reasons for sharing the same aspect in ordinary life, not to mention the ordinary life of institutions. It is also why I use "feature" as a verb and a noun, as a way of indicating how thinking always has a pictorial, aspectual quality—as something that we both participate in the shaping of and regard, in turn, as a picture that appears independent of us, even though it also cannot be so.[13]

Likewise, the previous example should indicate, in different terms, both the difficulty and the importance of telling a nonvoluntary relation from an involuntary one. For instance, in the face of criticism, the director could say that, while he does not like the final film any more than the critic does, he does not regret having made it, since what appeared did so against his will, in which case the indicators of the will are given strictly in aesthetic terms. Of course, these are not the only terms or reasons that matter; they are simply the ones that matter most to the director, who

enacts, in this very way, a preference ranking. They are also the effects that show as the result of an automation, since the camera records and projects (what is peculiar to *this* Godzilla alone) what it has no hand in shaping. But the director would not be particularly convincing with this line of appeal, since what shows as the film stems from an agreement to make an image of Godzilla, even if the reasons for doing so, on both sides, became quickly opposed. What did not get opposed—namely, an interest in producing *an* image of Godzilla—is what remains, is what is featured (is also *a* feature), even if its existence was constituted on the basis of otherwise incompatible reasons. It should be added that if the director tells the critic that he does not regret having made the film, he likely does so in order to continue participating in the institution of commercial filmmaking. And yet, as I stated at the outset, to claim that one has no regrets is to indicate that one had no potential—and certainly no necessary—relation to what occurred. It is also to indicate, more plainly, one's inflexibility, or one's incapacity to recognize that the reasons for carrying on in a particular institution (however broadly we conceive of any institution) might outweigh the relational purity of this one instance, which is nothing more than a preference ranking, or an inability to do something for someone without having a picture of their particularity, as I claimed in the introduction.

STUPIDITY AND AKRASIA

The examples I have just given—of a realty transaction that could go badly and a film that gets made despite the emergence of conflicting interests that nevertheless result in the production of what was agreed to, on an aspectual level—should begin to indicate the institutional dimension of my theory of regret. It should indicate equally well why the distinction between a nonvoluntary relation (in which case I believe, on the presumption of a state of necessity, that my will shall have no effect on what lies before me) and an involuntary relation (in which case I do not act when in fact what appears before does so in a state of contingency) is regularly collapsed in our ordinary experience of institutions. We saw that it is possible to share an aspect that features physical existence in the same way for parties that are nevertheless in possession of conflicting reasons for the existence of the very same relation, or aggregated aspect. And as I

hope both examples indicate, it is on the very basis of an assumption that what appears before us does so out of necessity—which follows from a further assumption of a nonvoluntary relation where there was, in fact, an involuntary one—that one forecloses the possibility of doing differently. That is to say, the assumption of the nonvoluntary relation where an involuntary one was at work—and despite the fact that we seem, in both cases, to be dealing with inanimate objects like film images and houses built next to volcanoes—leads, in the stated or simply notional absence of regret, to the declaration of a preference ranking. If the failure I endure leads me to take recourse to a preference ranking, instead of reflecting on what was available to my will in what has nevertheless passed, then I will only do what I have done before; thus I should expect either another fire (or bad real estate deal) or no more funding for my filmmaking career. Said failures are also likely to lead to stupid feeling, and to feeling stupid, which is where the question of bureaucracy emerges most plainly and also most importantly for my conception of the political potential of regret. We need, then, to understand what stupidity might mean in an institutional framework precisely as a way of indicating how regret might clarify political will.

What I take for granted here is that institutions involve the coordinated efforts of more than one person for the sake of members who cannot yet be named, since there will always be new and ongoing members of any institution. Thus, bureaucracies are implemented in order to tend to, or administer, the structure, rules, and concepts that were uniquely instituted by the institution *as* the institution. As a consequence, we can say (if also a bit too schematically, for reasons that will become clearer in chapter 3) that there is first an institution, then a bureaucracy—or an administration, the job of which is to maintain the institution—and then bureaucrats. It is important to emphasize that institution, bureaucracy, and bureaucrat all serve the same function—namely, the "life" of the institution. Yet these three levels do not stand as simple, transparent, and constant reflections of the unwavering truth of the other. As I indicated in the introduction, it is very difficult to quickly gauge the viability or value of a given institutional form or structure precisely because there is an administration, or bureaucracy, that stands for the institution but should not be understood as simply a structural inevitability of that institution, even if that also remains a possibility in many cases. For, among other reasons, there are many ways, as we know, to inhabit, interpret, and finesse the rules and concepts of any

institution, if we suspend our assumptions that we are in possession, negatively or positively, of the truth of the institution. Likewise, if bureaucracy and bureaucrat are related but not identical terms, then we are potentially at a further remove still from what we think the determining order or structurally isolable truth of any institution might be. A bureaucrat can work to serve an administrative order that is housed in, and tasked to protect, in turn, a given institution. If a bureaucrat agrees with the ambition of a particular administrative order, he or she can work to protect that order in any number of ways. This can include the all too familiar practice of obfuscation and evasion. The intent of the bureaucratic obfuscation is to distance the one who needs to redress a wrong done to them by and in an institution that is being interpreted and defended—at the time of said grievance—by an administrative order that cannot sustain itself nor its understanding of the institution, which it wants only to hegemonize, if such wrongs were addressed. It may also be the case that the bureaucrat simply takes as his or her job to mind his or her role and its adherence to the logic of administration in ways that take on the air of transparency, if by "transparent" we simply mean an orthodox, and necessarily limited, presentation of options that have been explained to this bureaucrat by the institution as *the way* of the institution.[14] In this sense, transparency is never subject to epistemic verification, only to discursive authority. But just as importantly, one can find bureaucrats and administrators who recognize the capaciousness of the rules themselves and demonstrate that capaciousness precisely because it is an option within the structure of the institution. If institution, bureaucracy, and bureaucrat were all locked in a mutually determinate structural relation, such instances of finesse in signification—i.e., *the way* we could not see, which is at odds with *the way* we are told that things are—would not be possible.

What I want to emphasize most strongly is that it is precisely because of the contingent character of the relation that pertains between institution, bureaucracy, and bureaucrat—a relation that is never forged by, or founded in, necessity—that stupidity emerges as a central concern for institutional experience. Stupidity is, among other states, an affective dimension of institutional involvement that often stands in the way of the emancipatory potential of regret, especially since the feeling of stupidity that institutions can produce in the one who fails to navigate that institution leads us to redraw the lines around what we think we know, which might be nothing at all. It is the very opposite of the flexibility in

signs and signification that we might otherwise attempt to mobilize. That is to say, what we thought was true—which is just a way of naming the nature of our grievance more than it is anything essential, articulable as a principle—remains, for us, "true," even though whatever principle guided our action seems to have found no correspondence in the place where correspondence is most expected. In such moments, if we feel our stupidity, we tend to rage against this or that bureaucrat; or else we rage against the bureaucracy itself, as if there were only ever just one kind. And yet our rage binds us in a terrible paradox, since what it most often does is to block our access to the flexibility of the institution to which, and in which, we make our appeal. In a state of rage we become inflexible in our demand for flexibility and foreclose, as a result, the gap between institution and bureaucracy, between bureaucracy and bureaucrat, as though all were related by necessity. We close the very gap that change requires and that marks an institution *as* an institution and not as an instance of natural law. Who would dare comply?

I do not wish to indicate that there is never any reason to subject bureaucrats or bureaucracies to the anger or the demands for a wrong they or it may have done. Nor am I trying to defend the justness of institutions per se, any more than I am intent to refuse or resist institutions anywhere they appear simply because the presence of one institution gone bad means that every other, by definition, will also go bad in time. For the sake of clarity, then, let us consider two recent and sharply opposed conceptions of institution and bureaucracy. The first belongs to John Searle, the second to David Graeber. Searle is concerned to defend institutions as a fact of human existence, if not nature, despite the constraints that institutions might be said to impose on the human and on nature. At its most basic level, for Searle, the human's capacity for language already indicates the presence of an institution, which leads him to say, and in a way that I take to be important to any conception of an institution, "If by 'state of nature' is meant a state in which there are no human institutions, *then for language speaking animals, there is no such thing as a state of nature.*"[15] Explicit in this suggestion, then, is an idea that institutions are human constructs as natural as the humans that build and sustain them—and more importantly, that institution building is a particularly elevated way of being human. Searle is quite clear on the point that institutions cannot be separated from nature any more than can language, to the extent that he understands institutions as involved in the largely benevolent increase of human power:

> There is a common element that runs through all (or nearly all) institutions, and that is that they are enabling structures that increase human power in many different ways. Think what life would be like if we did not have schools, property rights, and above all, language. Some social theorists have seen institutional facts as essentially constraining. [Searle cites Durkheim's *The Rules of Sociological Method* as his example of constraint.] That is a very big mistake. There is indeed an element of constraint in social institutions. For example, you cannot be president unless you get elected, you cannot spend money you do not have, and in baseball, you cannot have four strikes. But the very institutions of money and baseball increase our powers.[16]

Searle is obviously concerned to distinguish constraint from repression, terms that are regularly conflated in the critique of institutions.[17] Constraint, as his example suggests, is what protects democracy, insofar as one observes the rule that *x* amount of votes must be achieved in order for someone to be elected president; the obvious alternative would be that political authority be founded strictly on the basis of violence and self-interest. Likewise, in his baseball example, the constraint of three strikes instead of four indicates that one must learn to do more with less—that one must be more attentive, more resourceful, than one would need to be if four strikes were allowed.

It is, perhaps, the example of money that is more difficult to accept whole. Money does, of course, increase human power, and that power might simply have to do with an allocation of goods and services made possible by the representational dimension of money. I can use what I make from what I do to acquire something I need but cannot produce on my own. Why deny this? But then, as we know, money as an institution that creates human power can also produce radical inequality, in which case "power" takes on a much more pernicious aspect than it does as a description of the human's capacity to satisfy a need other than, and in addition to, one's own. That is to say, we know that institutions can be administered in ways that assure and facilitate radical inequality.

This is the idea of institutional constraint as fundamentally oppressive, which is what the anthropologist David Graeber pursues in *The Utopia of Rules: On Technology, Stupidity, and the Secret Joys of Bureaucracy*. For Graeber, "institution" and "bureaucracy" are largely conflated terms—where I prefer to indicate them as related but separable—and are addressed

under the heading of bureaucracy. For Graeber, bureaucracies are meant to produce stupidity in the ones they manage and do so, in his view, on the basis of a utopianism that each bureaucracy assumes:

> Bureaucracies public and private appear—for whatever historical reasons—to be organized in such a way as to guarantee that a significant proportion of actors will not be able to perform their tasks as expected. It's in this sense that I've said one can fairly say that bureaucracies are utopian forms of organization. After all, is this not what we always say of utopians: that they have a naïve faith in the perfectibility of human nature and refuse to deal with humans as they actually are? Which is, are we not also told, what leads them to set impossible standards and then blame the individuals for not living up to them? But in fact all bureaucracies do this, insofar as they set demands they insist are reasonable, and then, on discovering that they are not reasonable (since a significant number of people will always be unable to perform as expected), conclude that the problem is not with the demands themselves but with the individual inadequacy of each particular human being who fails to live up to them.[18]

Graeber goes further and suggests that the effect of this bureaucratic utopianism is that we take on our inadequacy as a feeling of stupidity—indeed, that the aim of bureaucratic organization is to produce stupefaction as a response to any potentially irritable demand made. Graeber continues: "To put it crudely: it is not so much that bureaucratic procedures are inherently stupid, or even that they produce behavior that they themselves define as stupid—though they do do that—but rather, that they are invariably ways of managing social situations that are already stupid because they are founded on structural violence."[19] For Graeber, then, stupidity indicates at least two things. There is the stupidity of the *structure* in structural violence, by which he seems to mean any institution that produces radical inequality and real violence as a result. I don't dispute the idea of structural violence in the least, merely the idea that it would be stupid, in the sense that the ones capable of producing that violence—by way of an institutional structure—lack intelligence, are incapable of thinking. In order to accept this we would have to presume for the perpetrator of violence and also the victim of that violence a nonvoluntary relation to what occurs. That is, we assume that the stupidity of the one doing the structuring is made stupid by the structure he effects and

upholds, in which case both the bureaucrat and the one affected violently by said structure are both situated in ways that could only be described as nonvoluntary, since "structure" stands in place of a reflective use of the will in both cases. Or to put it more simply, if structures makes us stupid where once we were smart, then there is no room for human agency, responsiveness, or responsibility. The presumption then—and in stark contrast to Searle—is that the only way out of structural violence is to abandon every institution. And while it is very compelling, for a lot of us, to imagine the end of the money system, it is important to remember that things like Bitcoin (to name just one alternative currency that produces quite a lot of stupefaction for the sake of gross accumulation) share that same interest for entirely non-altruistic reasons.

The point is not to say that one understanding of institutional constraint—either as productive or as entirely repressive—is necessarily better than the other. Though I do wish to emphasize, in a way that agrees with Searle, that institutions take as their goal the enabling of ways of doing and being that are greater than any of the ways available to one person alone, even if that means that one might also sacrifice some dimension of what one desires strictly for or as oneself. It is simply that nothing is guaranteed of an institution, positively or negatively, since institutions emerge on the basis of contingency and never necessity. If the opposite were true, what we would have is not an institution but a law of nature. What I am most concerned to indicate, then, is how in both instances there is, or at least can be (in the case of Graeber), more flexibility in an institution than one supposes. So even if one wants to say that Searle's vision is entirely utopian and in ignorance of the deceptive features of human motive—in light of his claim that the goal of most institutions is to enable human power—we can still imagine ways in which certain figures in government (say, the ones who favor and implement tax breaks for the wealthiest) can be removed from office, rather than spending our time imagining a world without a need for taxation itself. Likewise, in the case of Graeber, if we say that the representational system of money can only ever produce radical inequality, we would also need to note that alternatives to it, like bitcoins, in developing their own obfuscatory networks, are simply replacing one institution with another institution.[20] The point I want to make is, in fact, much smaller. In noting the capacity of institutions (in the case of Searle) and the difficulty of ever leaving one behind (in the case of Graeber), I want only to indicate that one effect of the stu-

pidity that bureaucratic administrations produce for the supposed sake of the institutions they serve (and sometimes the logic they are desperately concerned to protect) is that it can lead, most productively, to regret. That is to say, we can begin to see, if stupid feeling gives way to regret in the place of stubborn preference rankings and the angry trumpeting of first principles, that most relations within an institution are better perceived as involuntary ones rather than nonvoluntary ones. If stupidity gives way to rage, then we assume that what keeps appearing will only ever appear as it does, which could only lead to nihilism.

For this reason, I understand stupidity, here, to refer to one of two possible states, neither of which is essential or permanently binding. In the first sense, stupidity names an inability to hold together in thought incommensurables, whether such states indicate incommensurable demands or seemingly incommensurable phenomena. In the second case—which is not unrelated to the first—stupidity merely indicates whatever it is that I do not understand and feel shame or rage for not knowing, whether or not that shame or rage is reasonable. All that matters, in this case, is that I have perceived some aspect of my own stupidity, gone silent at the moment in which that gap reveals itself, and stood behind that silence as polite disagreement, even if I perform the mute signs of having been irretrievably wronged. In a more skeptical vein, we could say that this is precisely what the bureaucrat asks of us: that we hide our ignorance, leave it concealed by the outward expression of signs of the nonvoluntary relation he has produced for us. This is why the bureaucrat can bear the complaints about his own stupidity, knowing as he surely does, that our complaints do nothing less than register our own, so long as we remain incapable of recognizing the oblique relations that are in no sense nonvoluntary, and thus are in every instance a possible source of regret. Regret is, as we all know, the risk of engagement, but the risk is much less than we regularly suppose it to be, since regret only emerges in the realm of contingency and never necessity.

If I am lingering on the logic of bureaucracy, it is because this is the realm where a conception of regret is both most viable or useful and also the most challenging, especially when we assume that the bureaucrat is lacking in virtue, and even more so when, in fact, he is. I have in mind here the cases when a bureaucrat cannot think in terms of, nor feature in honesty, a mean. Moreover, if the bureaucrat regularly shows us signs and causes—signs set forth *as* causes—that are to be understood in terms

of a nonvoluntary relation, regret may well follow after rage and in the place of perpetual stupidity and stupefaction. The consequence of our regret is that in place of belief—i.e., that what was shown to me was the truth of the institution, whether what was featured for me was done so as deception or transparency—we will begin to perceive oblique relations, in which case we may begin to see an opening for a more productive use of our will. In this sense, I am sympathetic to Aristotle's distinction between nonvoluntary and involuntary relations insofar as regret emerges in the recognition of our own involuntary response. It is just that we will need to be able to recognize that a nonvoluntary relation is more likely an involuntary one. If we are capable of breaking with the perceptual habits bequeathed to us by the recurrent signs willed by another with an intention to deceive, or else breaking those habits that remain with us in ignorance, many so-called nonvoluntary relations can be exposed as the dissimulations of obfuscations that they truly are, rather than as evidence of our own stupidity.

Regret, I think we can now say, comes by way of the recognition that we have misused our will, that we acted in accordance with signs that were featured for us as beyond the reach of the will, and thus nonvoluntary. Regret is therefore what prevents us from either utopianism or nihilism. If we feel regret, it means that we can recognize the difference between a nonvoluntary relation and an involuntary one. We can see that the involuntary relation—which appeals to our ignorance at the very moment in which a knowing use of our will is in order—is nested in the appearance of a nonvoluntary relation, this thing that I think I can do nothing about, and regardless of how I feel about what has happened. And if we can see this, then what we can see in any instance is the potential to do otherwise, which will depend on our ability to perceive oblique and spontaneous relations. It is, perhaps, not so redundant after all to say that if we become less stupid—if, that is, we become more capable of the oblique relation, or holding together in thought incommensurable signs or logics—we will be held much less often in ignorance. It may be that this requires us to learn to anticipate without precedent, and precisely because the bureaucrat—if in thrall to the logic of a bureaucracy that is indeed concerned to defuse the demand we make—is himself someone who is skilled in thinking obliquely, in a discontinuous relation to what appears. Otherwise, we would never have fallen prey to a deception. I pursue this more directly in chapter 3. Likewise, it might be the case

that what regret allows us to see is our own perceptual habits, which are born of first principles, or at least behave as though they were. Regret may very well open a gap between what I think a bureaucrat does, or a bureaucracy *is*, and what the institution actually has the capacity for. Thus, if regret is related to virtue, virtue should no longer be understood as the achievement of a mean, since acting virtuously in the face of bureaucracy implies that our thoughts and our actions are to be severed from habit. And it is conceivable to act this way since the habits of perception that precede a virtuous act owe their occurrence to the contingency of signs in being.

In this sense, regret should be distinguished from akrasia, which was of paramount importance to Aristotle in *Nicomachean Ethics* and describes our capacity to make decisions that run counter to what we normally think of as best. As Amelie Rorty—an influential theorist of akrasia—has put it, "A person believes akratically when he believes that *p*, being implicitly aware that *p* conflicts with the preponderance of serious evidence or with a range of principles to which he is committed."[21] Akrasia, then, defines a use of the will, but toward an end that is other than what we might otherwise believe to be good—much like when we carry on with the task set before us by the bureaucrat, even though we curse him for setting before us something we know to be of no use. But it does not indicate a weakness of will. Just the opposite: *"Akrasia* is a disease that only the strong can suffer. To be capable of it, a person must not only be able to note his failures, but also be capable of voluntary intervention in his thought patterns, directing attention and inferences by the principle to which they commit themselves."[22] It is tempting to see in Rorty's suggestion that akratic thought—and the action that follows from it—involves an ability to intervene in one's own thought patterns, which is an experience similar to the one I am describing in terms of regret. Regret emerges in the recognition that a nonvoluntary relation is better understood as involuntary, such that I will now be better prepared to perceive oblique relations that cannot be predicted. And akrasia does indeed imply a strong will and an ability to think otherwise. But in such moments, we do what we do expressly to act in a non-virtuous manner. Likewise, for Rorty, akratic thought can lead to melancholia, our ability to persist in a state of mind, or worldview, that runs counter to our principles.[23] In this sense, regret is small change to the melancholic who can see the alternative but refuses to release his will from an akratic thought, even though

he should be capable of doing so. Moreover, since, in an akratic state, our thought and our will are directed expressly against a set of principles that constitute virtue as a habit of perception, the deviation from those principles will always be recognizable by way of those principles. Or as Amelie Rorty puts it, the very "conditions of *akrasia* assure the possibility of its reform."[24] And reform is, for Rorty—just as it was for Aristotle—the goal. But it need not be. We would be better served by the idea that thinking is what happens after or without respect to habituated perception, even if that implies that the actions we regard as lacking in virtue are owed to the very same capacity for thinking otherwise. An akratic thought/action merely mirrors, in inverse proportion, the moral logic of virtue and its habits. An akratic thought—or what appears to us as an akratic thought—might go further than the proportionally inverse limits of virtue allow, but if our perception remains grounded in habit, then we will not be capable of seeing what exceeds that limit.

The concept of akrasia is useful for beginning to understand how it is that administrations or bureaucracies or bureaucrats can act in a way that they consciously know to be at odds with what they otherwise believe. And an akratic thought may very well give way to regret. However, if the "conditions of *akrasia* assure the possibility of its reform," as Amelie Rorty suggests, then reform means only a return to principles, which stand in the way of what is most productive about regret. Even more troubling, in my view and also increasingly familiar, has to do with how akratic thought can be intensified in the form of euphemism, in which case we quite cheerily perceive a gap between what we know to be wrong and what we carry on doing anyway. I have in mind Alexander García Düttmann's incisive critique, in "Euphemism, the University, and Disobedience," of the status of euphemism in the administrative life of the contemporary university. As García Düttmann sees it, the zeal for euphemism is strongly related to the corporatization of what was once the unconditional university. Or as he puts it, "an unconditional university is, inherently, a university open to risk, to the risk of being subverted, while a university dominated by power, charlatanry, and euphemistic speech is a university that has ceased to expose itself or that seeks to minimize such exposure."[25] The unconditional university, it should be said, is still an institution; it is just one in which its "administration makes itself imperceptible, not because it has become ubiquitous but because is almost superfluous."[26] That is to say, the separation between institution, administration, and bu-

reaucrat still holds. What uniquely shows in the case of the unconditional university, however, is no particular principle, condition, or content but the very absence of principles, conditions, or form-determining content, which is what an administration alone can "provide." Most importantly, "in the unconditional university there can be no euphemism because the idea is not separated from reality by a gap."[27] It should be said that the gap indicated here in critical terms by García Düttmann is not the same gap that I've suggested is necessary to keep open between an institution, an administration, and a bureaucrat. Rather, "the gap" between an idea and reality indicated by García Düttmann is what prevents change from occurring, since euphemism anesthetizes the very gap that an administration produces and features for itself and for everyone else in it.

García Düttmann puts it this way:

> That euphemism is the linguistic condition of contemporary society means that those who live in this condition know about the reality of their lives without actually confronting it; deception and belief in some magical power merge in euphemistic speech, and the ability to deceive oneself and others collapses into self-deception as fate. When speaking, writing and thinking, euphemists actively contribute to the suppression of their awareness, and are therefore aware of what they try to conjure away, as well as of the repelling conjuration itself. They produce an ambiguity in which they install themselves. Using a euphemism always signals a resistance that stems from a fundamental acceptance.[28]

The akratic dimension of euphemism, then, is precisely this "resistance that stems from a fundamental acceptance." But worse than akratic thought, in which case I simply decide against something that I know to be at odds with what I actually believe or otherwise value, it is the cheeriness of euphemism itself that "protects" akratic thought from the possibility of reformation—though I hope to have indicated the kind of reformation akrasia makes possible is a return to first principles, even if that may be better than the situation created by euphemism. Put differently still, we can say that euphemism—as the name of the sustainability of gap that has been opened between an idea and reality—is melancholy's twin. In place of a mourning-without-end, we have instead a euphoria-without-end, the effect of which, in both cases, is that what appears before us remains entirely unchanged and unchangeable. In the case of euphemism,

regret will be even harder to come by, since what keeps going wrong only ever feels good. For the one in thrall to a euphemism, the question is not "what has gone wrong in what I've done?" but "why do I feel so good about what only goes worse and worse?"

Perhaps it could be argued, instead, that regret follows from a weakness of the will, which shares certain, but not all, of the characteristics of akrasia and euphemism, and does to some extent explain our inability to see that what the bureaucrat displays for us as a nonvoluntary relation might very well be the dawning of a recognition that what we have experienced, instead, is an involuntary one. In "Intention and Weakness of Will," Richard Holton defines weakness of will in a manner that distinguishes it from akrasia: "Central cases of weakness of will are best characterized not as cases in which people act against their better judgment, but as cases in which they fail to act on their intentions."[29] To draw the distinction, Holton cites a passage from Kingsley Amis's novel *Lucky Jim*—the moment in which Dixon, an untenured junior colleague, wakes up after a night of drinking in the home of his head of department, Professor Welch, only to find that he has cigarette burns all over his bedclothes. Holton cites the following passage from the novel: "Had he done all this himself? Or had a wayfarer, a burglar, camped out in his room? Or was he the victim of some Horla fond of tobacco? He thought that on the whole he must have done it himself, and wished he hadn't. Surely this would mean the loss of his job, especially if he failed to go to Mrs. Welch and confess what he'd done, and he knew already that he wouldn't be able to do that."[30] For Holton, this is not a case of weakness of will precisely because Dixon never intends to confess what he's done. As Holton explains, "It is because he knows that he is someone with a tendency to weakness of will that he acts as he does. So, on the account given here, his weakness of will explains his action (or rather his inaction)."[31] If his weakness of will explains his action, Holton's account goes, then Dixon does not act against what he otherwise intends, since he has no intention to be truthful. His action is weak, but since Dixon knows that he is weak-willed, he does not actually break with an intention to be honest. If, however, Dixon had vowed the day before never to drink again, then the next morning would be proof of weakness of will, since his actions ran counter to his intentions. He would have proven himself too weak in will to remain sober, to see his intention through to the end. Likewise, in Holton's account, this episode could not qualify as akrasia since he does not willingly act

against his better judgment. As Dixon sees it, it would be bad to confess this to his boss's wife, so he doesn't.

The trouble here is that weakness of will cannot account for the specificity of Dixon's thought—the range of possible signs, possible events—which await him on the other side of decision. It is too simple to describe him as weak-willed. It would be better to say that Dixon is trying to think ahead of the administrator. The situation cannot be defined by reason. He has to think politically. He needs to anticipate the possible ways of being read, and by the very one who has indulged with him in a night of heavy drinking—which involves the loosening of signs in the moment of intoxication and in memory. The choice, in other words, is not so simple. Nor is it a matter of virtue. There is no mean. Signs float and show multiple aspects at once. Perhaps Welch wanted to know if his young colleague was a good drinker and *thus* worthy of promotion. Perhaps he is a reader of Maupassant and would welcome the very idea of "some Horla" with a taste for tobacco. None of this is rational, but a "proper" use of the will cannot be restricted to reason, to the pursuit of truth as a stable set of signs that can be seen in just one way. What if Dixon gives away the wrong sign? That is, what if he shows too much? What if his head of department actually loathes Maupassant and is searching for a sign of Dixon's own irrationality? His imbecility? Sometimes we speak too soon; sometimes we show the wrong thing.

WHEN TO SPEAK?

If I have avoided, up to this point, naming what likely seems to be obvious—that regret is a problem of decision—it is because decision is most often understood, in political terms, as a problem of time, of knowing when to speak. This is surely Dixon's problem. Not just *what* but *when*, knowing all the while that one can wait too long. And to wait too long is to have things decided for you. But it is also the case that one can speak too soon, in which case one decides against oneself at the very moment that a judgment of the other is made. However, in this case the decision will be made less on the basis of what we know from or about the other, or an institution, than from the limits of our understanding, which, in a state of rage, comes to us as first principles. Or as Peter Sloterdijk puts it, "The deep simplicity of rage satisfies the all-too-human desire for strong motivations."[32]

The paradigmatic instance of this problem remains Kafka's *The Trial*—perhaps the book that has defined bureaucratic alienation for the last century. How it has done so is most succinctly described by Walter Benjamin. Claiming that Kafka's work "is an ellipse with foci that are far apart and are determined, on the one hand, by mystical experience (in particular, the experience of tradition) and, on the other, by the experience of the modern big-city dweller," Benjamin goes on to describe the big-city dweller: "One the one hand, I think of the modern citizen who knows that he is at the mercy of a vast machinery of officialdom whose functioning is directed by authorities that remain nebulous to the executive organs, let alone the people they deal with. (It is known that one level of meaning in the novels, particularly in *The Trial*, is encompassed by this.)"[33] Nested in Benjamin's account of the bureaucratic universe of Kafka's fiction is an important distinction between authorities and executive organs. Benjamin notices, in his own way, that institutions, administrations, and bureaucrats are related entities but are related as separate. Otherwise, the authorities would simply know and do what the executive organ demands. And in turn, what the sufferers in Kafka's universe do is to try to conflate the authorities with the executive organs. Benjamin is also careful to quote, in another essay on Kafka, a passage from *The Castle* that defines for him the strange elusiveness of authority, a passage that only heightens the absurd humor of the ones in Kafka who feel they are in possession of an understanding: "In Kafka's works, the conditions in offices and in families have multifarious points of contact. In the village at the foot of Castle Hill people use an illuminating saying: 'We have a saying here that you may be familiar with: official decisions are as shy as young girls.'"[34] The question, then, in Kafka's work concerns the secrecy of institutions and what it means to gain access to the secret. But in Kafka's world, access is also opposed by certainty, which is nearly always louder than these "shy young girls."

Consider, briefly, the lot of Josef K. in *The Trial*. Given what happens to K., and the novel's reputation more generally as a parable of bureaucratic terror, it is easy to forget the very trouble that K.'s own certainty causes him, especially since that trouble is at least coincident with his outrage. For what is it that first happens to K. when he awakes to find himself in his room surrounded by the strange men who are there to detain him, to notify him of his arrest? He is as galled by the actual arrest as he is by

an arrest that is introduced in the realm of habit—of the image he keeps of his own moral purity and also of the breakfast that he expects to be brought to him every day by 8 AM. On K.'s initial trips to the courtroom, which he makes in an effort to discover what it is, exactly, that he's been charged with, the injury he perceives to his moral standing comes quickly into focus. On his second trip, K. encounters a young woman who lives with her husband in the building that houses the courtrooms and magistrates' and students' offices. K. is attracted to this woman; he finds himself in a fit of rage as a young student takes her in his arms and leads her away, while K. is himself in the middle of trying to get information from her about where to go. Despite the young woman's plea to K. that it is not what he thinks, that the young student is just doing what was asked of him by the magistrate, K. accounts for his failure differently:

> Of course, there was no reason to let that worry him, he had suffered defeat only because he chose to do battle. If he stayed home and led his normal life he was infinitely superior to any of these people, and could kick any of them out of his path. And he pictured how funny it would be, for example, to see this miserable student, this puffed-up child, this bandy-legged, bearded fellow, kneeling at Elsa's bedside, clutching his hands and begging for mercy. This vision pleased K. so greatly that he decided if the opportunity ever arose, to take this student along to Elsa one day.[35]

K. presumes only that the young woman's relation to the man carrying her away—who is also not her husband—is nonvoluntary, precisely because the image he keeps of himself organizes his own visual and auditory field in such a way that seemingly prevents him from seeing the kinds of complications that would, at the very least, render the relation as involuntary and subject, as a consequence, to regret. She may, for instance, be choosing not to act for the sake of a decision or a relation to which K. has no access and will carry on having no access.

For K., regret never registers even in the moment in which he indicates it. For instance, just before the young man takes the woman away, both K. and the young woman confess to one another that they find each other attractive. K., however, quickly assumes that her confession of attraction is proof of her belonging to the very institution that is set on his ruin, and he tells her, triumphantly,

> Keep your present relationship with these people, it seems to me you really can't do without it. I say that with some regret, because, to return to your compliment at least in part, I like you, too, especially when you look at me as sadly as you do right now, although you really have no reason to. You're part of the group I have to fight, but you're quite comfortable among them; you even love the student, or even if you don't love you at least prefer him to your husband. That was easy to tell from what you said.[36]

If K. feels "some regret" and gives up on that regret, on the idea that she really is attracted to him, in favor of the image of institutional complicity, then what shows in the description is a dawning of the aspect. It is a choice he quite deliberately makes to perceive her in the image of administrative complicity, when the sign of sadness might indicate instead someone with a more complex relation to the institution in which she is nevertheless, and also quite literally, housed. What makes him say so, since he does not in fact know her, can only be predicated on an image—or a discourse—about the institution itself, so much so that the very person who might help K. to find his way becomes folded into what he can only see in just one way. That is to say, K. assumes that since she lives in the space of legal administration she *is* that administration, even though her pleadings to him indicate the awareness that Benjamin offers about Kafka's world. Namely, she, like him, may very well be "at the mercy of a vast machinery of officialdom whose functioning is directed by authorities that remain nebulous to the executive organs, let alone the people they deal with."

Perhaps the trouble for K., or at least a part of it, is that he speaks too soon, and in a way that cancels out the emancipatory potential of regret by virtue of the certainty that he brings to bear on the institutions that nevertheless confound and destroy him. He confuses the simplicity of rage with the clarity of signs. This is indicated rather forcefully in K.'s first visit to the courthouse, a trip he makes—somehow—without any definite indication of where he is meant to go and at what time he is to be there. Upon his arrival, the narrator describes K.'s state: "He was annoyed that they hadn't described the location of the room more precisely; he was certainly being treated with carelessness or indifference, a point he intended to make loudly and clearly. Then he went up the first set of stairs after all, his mind playing with the memory of the remark the guard Willem had

made that the court was attracted by guilt, from which it actually followed that the room for inquiry would have to be located off whatever stairway K. chanced to choose."[37] What we have in this astonishing passage, then, is an important link between rage, certainty, and time. If the court is attracted by guilt, then the court cannot be cleanly told apart from the one who is attracted there. K., as the narrator suggests, cannot but go where he belongs, since where he "belongs" is the place he has only ever imagined. So any door will do. What he can see in just one way, so much so that any door will be the right door, is bolstered by his eagerness to set things straight before having a clearer picture of what "things" are. This is also one way of thinking (in no sense the only way) about how K. manages to find himself ensnared. K. begins his search on day one, you will recall, by inventing a name of a carpenter, Lanz—a name he intends to use simply as a pretext for asking people if they know what apartment "Lanz" lives in. K. believes that this pretext, this imaginary Lanz, will give him an opportunity to see into many apartments on the very idea that he might detect, in one of them, the site where the commission of inquiry might actually be located. As he is taken from room to room, floor to floor, K. grows weary and the narrator tells us, "He regretted his plan, which at first had seemed so practical."[38] However, as soon as he countenances his regret—which would, presumably, have afforded him the chance to rethink his strategy and just go home, since he remains free to do so—someone answers the question about the carpenter affirmatively and leads him in. In attempting to show one thing for the sake of doing another, which is what we often say about the bureaucrat, K. encounters someone who is prepared to participate with K. in the image that K. has nevertheless fabricated for very different reasons. In his haste for justice, K. behaves in the very way that he expects the bureaucrat to behave. They can agree on an image of how things are, but do so, we can only assume, for very different reasons. Or perhaps it is better to say that what fails K. are his reasons, that his failure cannot be separated from the reasons he takes as the ground of his liberation.

CHAPTER TWO

Impossible Advice

When we anticipate the possibility of regret—when we worry over a decision we nevertheless have to make—we typically seek advice. If regret is an opening, if it enables us to better perceive the relative scarcity of nonvoluntary relations and to see the oblique relation where once we insisted merely on what appears, as I have suggested in the previous chapter, then how will we regard advice, which we regularly experience as a way of managing the contingencies that appear to us *as* contingency and never as something necessary? What will advice contribute to the opening that regret makes possible? Or to put it more directly: What will it mean for us to regard regret as *possible*? Our question, then, is about how or even what advice contributes to regret, especially since one typically seeks advice expressly in order to avoid regret. Were these options before me not an expression of contingency—of contingent paths—then there would be no option at all; there would be no occasion for decision. If there is no occasion for decision, then there is also no error and thus no regret. The way will have been obvious. And herein lies the problem. Regret, as I have argued, brings us into attunement with the contingency of things. It forces me to recognize an action—or inaction, as the case may be—as involuntary (despite the fact that I've done nothing) rather than nonvoluntary (in which case doing nothing bears no relation to the will). And yet advice—if it is good advice—will prevent me from experiencing regret. If I have been spared the occasion of regret, then it would seem that I will also not be in a position to recognize the way in which involuntary relations are often passed off, or perceived, as nonvoluntary ones.

There is, perhaps, no greater expression of the problem of advice as that which forestalls regret—and thus the emancipatory potential that comes from the awareness that I have acted in error, at least once, if not many other times—than Tay Garnett's adaptation of *The Postman Always Rings Twice* (1946). I begin this chapter, then, with a brief account of the problems raised by Garnett's film, insofar as the reference makes clear, albeit in a fictional domain, the problem that will need to be addressed in this chapter: namely, the "error" that comes nested in every instance of altruism, which the anticipation of regret always runs the risk of summoning.

THE POSTMAN ALWAYS RINGS TWICE

The Postman Always Rings Twice tells the story of Frank Chambers, a lawless drifter who happens upon Cora, the young wife of a much older proprietor of a roadside diner and service station on the California coast. An immediate consequence of their mad attraction is a plan to kill the husband, which they eventually succeed in doing when Frank and Cora drive up a winding stretch of a coastal highway and send the husband over a cliff with the car. It is an event well described by the district attorney (DA) prosecuting the case as something performed "accidentally on purpose." In order to succeed in their attempt to kill the husband "by accident," Frank and Cora must perform the signs of decisiveness in intoxication—in both Frank and the husband—for the DA, who has been watching them for some time and who appears before them at the very moment in which the trio are just beginning to embark on this lethal trip. Once the DA turns up at the roadside station—on the pretense of needing air for his tires—the pair reward that particular fiction with a fiction of their own: the performance of a scene of drunken struggle. What the DA sees, in particular, is Frank, who is pretending to be drunk, arguing with the husband, who really *is* drunk, over who will drive the car on this trip, which the husband foolishly believes to be the beginning of a holiday in western Canada. To the DA, however, both Frank and the husband appear drunk. He is convinced. Let us say that Frank and the husband are united under the same aspect, related to each other as "drunks." Cora comes along as planned, pushes both Frank and the husband aside, and takes the wheel.

In this brief performance, the DA is prepared to see what he will nevertheless not be present to witness. The signs of drunken struggle are intended, in this way, to be understood by the DA as an indication of a decisive will to drive, in the case of both men, that will presumably resume once they are out of the DA's sight, at least as the DA is meant to see it. These signs of an exaggerated decisiveness in intoxication will express—if they are to succeed in producing a sense of continuity across a period of time in which they will not actually be visible—an unexpected distinction between an involuntary relation and a nonvoluntary one. Frank insists on driving drunk—an insistence that Frank performs strictly for, and in view of, the DA. Likewise, he performs this insistence as failure, in that Cora finally takes the wheel. And yet, should the drunken battle between the two men occur again, as the staged performance implies that it will, only the husband will be held responsible, however paradoxically, for his own death, which will, at best, be understood as an involuntary relation, since the husband will come to be understood as having been capable of doing otherwise. Frank, who will also appear on the record as drunk, and about whom it will be told that he lost his battle with the husband for control of the wheel, will be declared innocent, since his actions rendered him—albeit subsequently—incapable of allowing the situation to be otherwise. The accident, in other words, will be shown to be something that was necessary and thus not subject to contingency.

What will matter most of all, if Frank's and Cora's plan pans out—that is, what will allow the involuntary relation to be read as a nonvoluntary one—is that the signs on display be performed and understood continuously *as* something continuous, and as such, only barely noticeable. That is, the signs must create a visual sense of continuity that spans across a phenomenal gap in the field of the DA's vision during which the event of the husband's death will have occurred. Frank and Cora will have to fix the signs of an accident that never really was one. What was accidental in the accident—the fall that Frank will take along with the car and the husband in his effort to merely nudge the car over—is what must also remain repressed if the crash is to appear as something that was beyond any reach of the will. To put it somewhat differently, the accident will only be knowable if it can be understood *as* continuous, and if continuous, then also as something necessary. What remains unseen in the accident must be visible in what appears. If the husband's death is to be understood as nonvoluntary, where Cora and Frank are concerned, then

the signs must remain just as they were initially featured. For if the death of the husband is found to be the result of an involuntary relation (i.e., involuntary manslaughter), then some guilt can be assigned; some time can be served. We can, in this way, begin to understand the potential for criminal sovereignty that is opened up—and rather inadvertently, I can only imagine—by the severing of all nonvoluntary relations from the achievement of virtue that Aristotle performs in such a trivial-seeming manner in his *Nicomachean Ethics* and as we saw in chapter 1. Frank and Cora understand that the perfect crime is bad murder, insofar as bad murder shows the signs of the accidental or the unstudied. Or as Frank says in a voice-over that begins the scene I have just described, "This was going to be such a bad murder that it wouldn't *be* murder."

The past tense of Frank's admission announces his regret in advance of the event we are about to see, which has already occurred. This *was going to be* a bad murder. Frank's voice-over tells us what should have occurred, while the images display, with some important exceptions, what actually occurred. What the past tense allows us to see, in particular, is the contingency in what was meant to appear to all as something necessary because it was unavoidable—the discontinuity in what was meant to be continuous and thus barely noticeable as something that requires, or once required, both a decision and an action. Let us not confuse the two. In this way, Frank's confession stages the emancipatory potential of regret, and does so strictly for the spectator—for the one who will still have an opportunity to act otherwise in an event that is nevertheless entirely unrelated to what appears before her. It is too late for Frank, but it is not too late for us, since whatever regret has to teach us is that what has passed will only help us to see the unexpected in what might come in an altogether different form.[1]

If the temporal discontinuity between voice-over and image mimics the structure of regret in its emancipatory form—insofar as it simultaneously displays both what should have happened and what actually happened—the problem that necessitates this temporal disjunction to begin with is the failure that follows from, and that can be attributed to, the advice Frank and Cora receive. That is to say, Frank and Cora fail precisely because of the advice they take and their subsequent inability to measure up to the demand made by that advice, which is the risk we all run when we seek advice in a state of panic, when we might instead stay with what remains uncertain a while longer.

The advice Frank and Cora receive comes in two particular instances. In the first, the problem of advice will be best understood as a question of the frame and what it makes visible and possible. That is, Garnett is careful to feature the limits of the film frame as a full expression of what is available to thought. The limits of the frame constitute the visibility that is made possible by advice, while representing at the same time the entire, if also a foreclosed, field of signs from within which any decision must be made. What is most thinkable is what appears in a frame. Garnett's attention to the frame as the subject of the film slightly upsets, as we will see, the promise of the film frame summoned by Stanley Cavell in *The World Viewed*:

> The camera, being finite, crops a portion from an indefinitely larger field; continuous portions of that field could be included in the photograph in fact taken. Hence objects in photographs that run past the edge do not feel cut; they are aimed at, shot, stopped live. When a photograph is cropped, the rest of the world is cut *out*. The implied presence of the rest of the world, and its explicit rejection, are as essential in the experience of a photograph as what it explicitly presents. A camera is an opening in a box: that is the best emblem of the fact that a camera holding an object is holding the rest of the world away. The camera is praised for extending the senses; it may, as the world goes, deserve more praise for confining them, leaving room for thought.[2]

Garnett's frame cuts off the rest of the world for the sake of thought, but it does so on a much more cynical register than the one suggested by Cavell, who regards the frame as an expansive mode of attentiveness predicated on the limits that every frame introduces. In *The Postman Always Rings Twice*, the limits of the frame or the edge of the photograph constitute a world that is intended to be understood as more reliably knowable insofar as the presence of the image's edge is felt to be the demarcation of what is most factual and thus most worthy of reflection because most concentrated. And by concentrated I mean at least two things: first, the gathering together of what can be held most tightly, as if all that is can be squeezed in one, and second, that which is subject to reflection. If something else mattered more why would it not have appealed to the visible "inside" constituted by the edge of the frame? Are we to believe that what appears is always what is most worthy of reflection?[3] The evidentiary dimension of the frame, thus conceived, is registered in the lawful, predatory language

with which Cavell describes the capture of the object on film: "they are aimed at, shot, stopped live." Cavell's description of the frame will just as readily, in another context, describe the work of a gun. If such a conflation is unavoidable—if the fullness of world that a restricted field of visibility gives to attention is also readable as an instance of brute force—will we know *more* or *less* about what appears there? If something is stopped live, can it truly be said to tell us more than that which resists capture? Won't the frame simply tell us what it has prepared the ones or things contained within it—as a frame—to say? Perhaps the frame itself tells us something more definitive than what it shows in any single instance.

Let us consider these provocations with reference to two extended scenes from Garnett's film. The first scene occurs in the immediate aftermath of the car crash that kills the husband and takes Frank—who nevertheless survives—along with it. The scene opens in a long shot that shows Frank in bed at the front of the image and to the right. Behind him and at the center of the frame is a doorway, to the left of which sits a policeman reading a newspaper (figure 2.1). As the DA enters through the doorway and walks past the policeman, Garnett's camera moves with him, closing in on the DA and Frank in a more intimate medium two-shot, which allows us to see just enough of the door, through which the policeman—who might otherwise have been a witness to the exchange to come—now exits (figure 2.2). The DA very quickly attempts to coerce a confession from Frank, and as he does so Garnett's camera moves between a tightly framed shot/reverse-shot sequence, which produces a sense of tension in the frame by virtue of the combative sense of separation it effects, and then back out to a medium shot, which features both men in the frame at the same time (figures 2.3, 2.4, 2.5, 2.6, 2.7). This most basic—and also the most iterated (i.e., the most possible)—of all stylistic routines enacts a logic of separation and unity, which identifies at the level of form the stakes of the decision Frank must make: either remain against the law, as if in permanent shot/reverse-shot, or else remain in continuity with the law, as if in a medium two-shot that echoes (figure 2.2), on a smaller scale, the limits of the world announced by the long shot with which the scene began (figure 2.1). Frank initially denies his involvement in the murder. His denial only exacerbates the antagonism of the shot/reverse-shot convention until the DA tells him something that he does not seem to know, namely, that Cora had just two days earlier taken out a life insurance policy on the husband. Noting Frank's surprise at this new detail, the DA

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offers Frank a piece of advice: sign a complaint against Cora, which will have the effect of condemning her but also of securing his innocence. Knowing that he needs to maintain his story about having been drunk at the time, Frank cannot plausibly—even if correctly—demonstrate that he knows otherwise simply because he has seen otherwise. He must commit, instead, to a blind spot that really is not one even though it is redoubled by the film frame, which now excludes Cora and emphasizes, as such, the problem of maintaining continuity in the absence of visibility. That is to say, it would be difficult for Frank, or any other, to carry on thinking about what remains to be seen as something that will be seeable in the same way as what now appears. To rehearse Cavell's claim in a slightly different way, then, any other portion of the world could be taken, shown, and thus understood as most pertinent, as an expression of what can be known most reliably by virtue of what can be generalized about what appears within *this* frame. Frank will have to decide what to do on the basis of something he does not know for certain: Did Cora actually purchase the insurance? The limits of the frame constitute a world, and they also compel an unsettling of another world. *How well do I know her, really? What will I make of her now that she no longer appears in the same way?*

At the end of this scene, once the DA has secured Frank's assent to the advice he offers, Garnett reframes the shot, returning to a medium long shot much like the one with which the scene began, at which point Cora's lawyer appears in an effort to assist Frank (figure 2.8). However,

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whatever sense of hope we might feel for Frank in the reframing movement of the camera that expands space and visibility does not last long. Cora's lawyer quickly learns that Frank has decided to file the complaint, which compels the lawyer to cease listening and to ask Frank, in turn, to stop talking (figures 2.9 and 2.10). If the lawyer knows what it is that has been concealed from Frank—and thus also from us, which is also marked by the edge of the frame—the potentially emancipatory signs he has to offer are muted by the advice Frank accepts and must now measure up to in silence. As the lawyer, Keats, tells Frank on his way out, "Just once more: I'm handling this. And that means, whatever I do, I'm handling it." The advice Frank receives commits him to an order of appearance and way of understanding, that is, to a particular aspectual arrangement of details. Frank takes the advice of the DA because he cannot see otherwise, because he does not know how to live with indecision. Cora's lawyer will remain in the frame *as if* he had nothing different to say. Frank's decision to take the DA's advice, which

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he will quickly come to regret, gives rise to another form of advice that will create another enclosure, even when it looks like an opening.

The second piece of advice is given to Cora and follows from the bad advice that her lawyer understands to have been given to Frank, who now appears with Cora in a holding room just after her pre-trial hearing takes place, wherein the lawyer—anticipating Cora's hotheadedness—enters a guilty plea on her behalf. In other words, when the judge asks Cora the nature of her plea, Cora's lawyer is the one to answer even though it is only she who has been addressed. The lawyer withdraws the charge the next day, ultimately, as a way of performing—in a public and legal space—the movement of his thought from certainty to doubt. What he will want to establish in particular is that what yesterday seemed so obvious today seems more ambiguous. Between these two court appearances, however, we witness Cora blow up at Frank in the holding room for having turned against her. So entirely full of rage, Cora asserts her right to commit a confession to the record, which will, she assumes, bring Frank down along with her. Having allowed the confession to take place, the lawyer offers to rip up the confession, which would give the couple a chance to begin again. That is, Cora's lawyer admits to having staged the documentation of the confession, which he rips up expressly so that Cora will have the opportunity to take his advice; this should prevent an experience of regret, which is all that could follow from the legal registration of her confession, made in a moment of passion. Indeed, the lawyer tears up the confession strictly on the condition that from now on she take only his advice, that she speak only when spoken to. Cora is advised to take only his advice, to do only what he says to do.

Immediately after this scene of advice taken, and regret forestalled, Cora and the lawyer return to court and enter a plea of not guilty, which the lawyer expects the DA to accept on the basis of what he knows that the DA does not yet know: namely, that the insurance company has already cut the check for the husband's death. Cora's lawyer, in other words, knows that the DA is only hoping for a confession of guilt from Cora, since the DA's own investigation is unlikely to have produced more conclusive evidence than the investigation conducted by the insurance company, which yielded no conclusive evidence whatsoever. If an insurance company cannot find the signs of intent in what has been filed as an accident, then how will the DA do better, knowing (as the lawyer does) that an insurance agent will look much harder than will a detective since the insurance agent

will have more to lose? The DA quickly agrees on the condition that Cora accepts a plea bargain of manslaughter, which comes with a suspended sentence. What Cora agrees to—what delivers back her freedom—is a charge that admits of wrongdoing and yet goes on record as an accident.

The trouble for Cora and Frank, stemming from the advice they take, is that any departure they make from the lawyer's advice, which involves living consistently and manifestly within the limits of the law, will result in a new criminal charge authored by the DA, who will, in the aftermath of this particular decision, seek other signs of criminal wrongdoing in recompense for the justice that he believes to have gone missing. This is what happens, in the end, to Frank. At the end of the film, Cora and Frank attempt to reconcile. In order to test the extent of Frank's desire for reconciliation, Cora takes him on a swim. At first we see the couple enter the ocean together, swimming outward. Garnett then cuts to a two-shot of the couple already in the sea, floating in place. The edges of the frame eclipse any possible view of the land, which underscores in visual terms Cora's claim that she is too exhausted to swim back. The frame, in other words, simplifies the terms of decision: Frank can let Cora die, which will speak only and also officially of his rage, or else drag Cora to shore in an act of avowed compassion. Immediately following the couple's return to the shore, which is also an expression of unity, they wind up in a car crash that takes Cora's life.

The DA frames Frank for murder, knowing that what he is calling murder may indeed have been an accident. However, in the process of investigating Cora's death, the DA found a note left in the cash register of the diner by Cora, who had been thinking—up to the point that the swim began—of leaving Frank forever. This note, which was only ever meant to be a goodbye, included an admission of the pair's culpability in the murder of the husband. In the final scene of the film, we witness the DA tell Frank, who otherwise awaits his demise on death row, that he can, in fact, plead not guilty to murdering Cora and that he might even beat the charge. But, as the DA goes on to insist, he will just end up where he is now and in no time, since Frank can now be tried and convicted for the murder of the husband, owing to the confession Cora left behind. Frank comes to believe that death is his fate, which he also confesses to God, despite the fact that there is a better explanation at hand than the supposed necessity of divine intervention. The difference between a nonvoluntary relation and involuntary one depends, then, much less

on anything essential or necessary than it does on the arrangement of signs in a continuous way, such that what appears again, in an aspectual relation, is what appeared in fact just once.

Our problem is twofold. Advice, or the one who advises, institutes and features a world in which regret might be alleviated. But in taking the DA's advice, Frank can live in a world that suits just one way of being and that was authored by just one. But how will we know this one way since it involves at least two people and has nothing to do with romantic love, even if it began in a state of mad attraction? Frank, as we know, cannot live with the advice he initially receives since he wants to live in world with others; he wants to live, at least, with Cora *as if* one. But the only way to do this, given the advice that Frank has already taken, is to accept—and without even a hint of variation—the advice of another, which now comes from a third. Failure to live in strict accordance with the limits of what this advice now makes possible, however, guarantees death, or non-being; this non-being comes by way of an extension of the logic of signs of the advice spurned, which has the capacity to give the appearance of necessity to something that is better understood as contingent—multifaceted in its non-necessity.

But what would have happened if Frank just said, "I don't know"?

POSSIBLE ADVICE

We will come to consider what it means—or what it could do—to say, "I don't know." The opportunity to do so, we can at least indicate briefly, depends on our ability to recognize the possible in every offer of advice—to be able to recognize advice as something much greater than one idea among others. Advice begets the possible, which is also a world that appears as one no matter how many things or persons it involves or includes. In many respects, *The Postman Always Rings Twice* is a parable about the possibility of advice itself and of what nevertheless remains impossible in the advice we take. Thus, before we can come to an understanding of what it might mean to insist on not knowing, we will need to understand something more basic yet: namely, whether or not advice is "possible." To what extent, that is to say, does the advice we receive or the advice we give consist strictly in the ligature of the possible? To be clear, I am interested to know not whether it is possible to give advice (it

is, of course), but whether advice itself is only ever an expression of the possible, which, as we will see, will come to share something important with bureaucratic logics.

By "possible" I do not mean something that happens "by chance," nor do I mean to invoke some version of infinite relativity. Rather, the notion of "the possible" I have in mind here is derived variously from the accounts given of it in a continental philosophical tradition—including Heidegger, Adorno, Blanchot, Derrida, and García Düttmann—as a limit that is constitutive only of sameness, iterability, repetition, and above all else, non-being, whether or not non-being comes to stand for, or even just with, death. What unites the various conceptions of the possible on offer, regardless of the important nuances that each of these thinkers introduces to the concept, is an understanding of the possible as something that has, by definition, already occurred. Something can happen or appear because it has already happened or appeared. I know that it is possible because I know that it has happened at least once before. The possible is also a way of understanding the persistence of a given aspectual relation or form of seeing, one that acquires its durability on the basis of advice. The possible is, in this way, a mode of recognition that can never contribute to our comprehension of what could, and in all likelihood *will*, lie just outside of what it describes.

In this respect, death determines the ontological stakes in the relation between the possible and the impossible, which is perhaps best indicated in Heidegger's suggestion that "death is the possibility of the absolute impossibility of Da-sein."[4] In one sense, the consciousness of death—as Heidegger more broadly conceives of it—is what makes life possible as something that we ourselves will as something singular. If death is what we know to be lying in wait, then we cannot but give to being what we think it most uniquely requires, or can be accessed with or by way of care. But if death is what awaits us all, and the singularity of being—of Dasein—is predicated on what will happen to us all equally, as Heidegger's existential analytic supposes, then perhaps life will have never happened—at least to no one in particular—even if we all stick around for some time. Or as Derrida asked, with respect to Heidegger, "Is my death possible?"[5] Put this way, the impossible is either what death makes possible, insofar as death stands as an imperative to singularity and autonomy, or else the impossible is what it appears to us in more ordinary language usage as something that cannot be—which implies that *being* cannot be, if death

makes life possible, if by "life" we intend something marked by distinction, singularity, and thus brevity.

Before we can understand the ontological stakes of the possible as a question of what life *might be*, we should consider the possible as something that comes to us more immediately as a problem of comprehension—of seeing in general, and seeing generally—especially insofar as comprehension is understood as what follows from apperceptive activity, or an aspectual relation sustained as if unwavering through time. And it is important to emphasize here that comprehension is never converted to knowledge, not even in the dawning of a new aspect. The aspect stands in place of knowledge, if by knowledge we mean to imply some thing or relation that is subject to epistemic verification. Rather, if I can see the same thing in two ways, then the shift that takes place is simply from one mode of comprehension to another. What I have in mind here resembles the conception of the possible indicated by Maurice Blanchot in *The Infinite Conversation*, where comprehension is understood to follow from what is appropriable. If any given phenomenon is appropriable, then it will have to bear an at least partial likeness to something that has been recognized or used once before. Or, as Blanchot has it, "Even comprehension, an essential mode of possibility, is a grasp that gathers the diverse into a unity, identifies the different, and brings the other back to the same through a reduction that dialectical movement, after a long trajectory, makes coincide with an overcoming."[6] In Blanchot's formulation of comprehension, the possible is an overcoming, which is something other than an advance, since what the possible overcomes is *difference*. Appropriation is the name given to a sameness that consists only in a quenchless expansion, here identified by Blanchot as dialectical movement. Excess—or whatever remains in diversity, for any being in time, and also for the time being—is merely a condition for the satisfaction of sameness by the *always more* that the possible requires, even if we can say that the possible is nothing more than what has happened at least once. To speak of the possible, then, is to refer to both the *conditions* of possibility—to the conditions by which something will become visible or knowable with respect to the features that something can be said to share, identically, with something else—and to what continues to accumulate as same.

The steady knowability of what appears, which is the promise common to every instance of the possible, depends—in Blanchot's formulation, at least—on an understanding of the possible as a frame. Unlike Cavell's

frame, which enables a privileged mode of attentiveness, by which the more that can be known is accomplished through the work of condensation afforded by the frame, Blanchot's frame depends instead (much like Garnett's frame) on a mode of attentiveness that involves neither concentration nor reflection nor circumspection. If Cavell's frame is a reduction that is also an expansion, Blanchot's frame is an expansion that yields only a reduction, no matter what is added to, or absorbed by, it. What the frame orients, in particular, are the aspects of phenomena that remain available to be seen and yet go unnoticed by virtue of the consistency in and across multiple aspects of objects, persons, and places that the frame begets. In an experience of the possible, we think we are merely seeing—that we are seeing in an immediate way—since what appears makes no particular demand of us; we believe that what the frame features is what there is to see. What "appears" works. We know our way around. Better to say that all we know in any instance of the possible is *a* way around. Or as Blanchot puts it, "We say something is possible when a conceivable event does not run up against any categorical impediment within a given horizon. It is possible: logic does not prohibit it, nor does science or custom object. The possible, then, is an empty frame; it is what is not at variance with the real, or what is not yet real, or, for that matter, necessary."[7] As an expression of the possible, the frame is not at variance with the real, or the not-yet-real, simply because what appears *appears* real, since we see what we see according to the way that we have seen before. The frame appropriates in advance the difference that would come to us, Blanchot indicates, as either a category mistake—which is how difference would indicate an otherness to logic—or else as a break with custom. This is what we saw happen with Josef K. in chapter 1. I would add that the possible is a moral condition, or better to say a moral failure, since it can only uphold—much like an instance of preference ranking, as I discussed in the introduction—what it confuses as an instance of the good with the expression of what is real, or beneath aspectual arrangement. Yet what feels most real, in such moments—the feeling of conviction that both follows from the possible and makes the possible *possible*—is derived from a relation of aspects in a logic of sameness that accords with principles that remain external to me, even if the existence of those principles is ostensibly owed to the confirmation registered in and about my being, which can only imply being-in-the-right-way. What being-in-the-right-way involves, then, is the appropriation of aspects such

that the world appears to me as something familiar, which implies that aspects never appear to me *as* aspects, as otherwise discrete phenomena that have been coordinated thematically in terms of resemblance. Should an aspect appear to me *as* an aspect and not as something in full view as one thing, then I will relinquish that particular aspect, which has proven resistant to appropriation, to a realm beyond the frame. The frame holds only what works, which is also what will not be noticed. I will go on not noticing what resists by dint of the security I feel in what accords, even if what accords is something that makes no demand of reflection, which is how we feel, for example, when we are somewhere familiar. The experience of familiarity is nothing if not the forgetting of signification in place, which nevertheless does not cease. Likewise, we might say the same about foreignness, which can be understood as signs that appear to us as ceaselessly related in—and by dint of—their discontinuity.

Obviously, my understanding of the aspect here is indebted to a particular understanding of Wittgenstein's ideas about aspects and the problem of "seeing as." In *Philosophical Investigations*, Wittgenstein describes the aspect by way of an example: "I contemplate a face, and then suddenly notice its likeness to another. I *see* that it has not changed; and yet I see it differently. I call this experience 'noticing an aspect.' Its *causes* are of interest to psychologists. We are interested in the concept and its place among concepts of experience."[8] In this respect, the dimension of aspect seeing that concerns me here has to do with the way in which Wittgenstein describes "experience," which emerges in *Philosophical Investigations* in his discussion of "aspects of organization." In such cases, Wittgenstein avers, we see something like *this* and now like *that*—a change of aspect, a different way of perceiving the same thing, which remains the same no matter how we perceive it—on the basis of our experience, which Wittgenstein very curiously describes not as something real but as something that can only follow from "the mastery of a technique."[9] We can see something *this* or *that* way if we have seen it *this* or *that* way at least once before. Experience is not reality but merely something possible. "It is only if someone *can do*, has learnt, is master of, such-and-such, that it makes sense to say that he has had *this* experience."[10] Wittgenstein's discussion of the aspect concerns, more generally, the difficulty of deciding when we are merely seeing something and when we are thinking about the something that we see. What his discussion of "aspects of organization" describes so well, then, is the way in which experience is understood as

a thinking that becomes a forgetting, insofar as we stop noticing that we are still seeing an aspect; we now take seeing this aspect for granted as we operate in space in a manner that observes the aspect as it once dawned on us and now remains with us, but it does so as something forgotten. If the dawning of the aspect shows thinking in seeing, then experience becomes thought—no longer thinking—which is one more version of the possible.[11]

This, it seems to me, is why Blanchot refers to the possible as an empty frame in a given horizon. We will ask what it means to regard a horizon in terms of *givenness*. But for now, let us say that if the frame is said to exist in a given horizon it must also be in accord with what lies outside of it, such that the frame is not merely an instance of the possible but also a force of possibilization. The aspects that will be brought into accord must lie in wait. The "horizon" is constituted by possibility itself, by whatever lies in wait as the somewhere else I can go, somewhere else I might be, which is constituted by the very same limits as the frame or the field of the possible in which I find "myself." The not-yet-real of Blanchot's formulation is merely what lies in wait as possible because appropriable and thus conducive to an experience of continuity. But if it is possible for me to go beyond where I am now, how will we measure the distance traversed, since where I will be and what I will see once I get there is simply what works because possible? In this sense, we shall have to say that there is nothing beyond the possible, even when we surpass whatever has been framed in any particular instance.[12]

This is, for example, what happens in the reframing of the medium shot that opens itself up in a continuous process to the long shot, or the initial and determining frame that we see at the outset of the DA's interrogation and advisement of Frank. The smaller shot does not cut to a larger one, as if in contrast or forced sympathy. Rather, the frame widens in what is experienced as one consistent movement. And it does so despite the fact that the frame also features Cora's lawyer, who could change the way that everyone reads the signs on display in the very frame in which he still stands. He could also expose the frame as a limit.[13] In this respect, the "emptiness" of the frame denotes nothing absent. What emptiness indicates instead is a capacity for appropriation, so much so that a succession of frames produces only consonance and never discord. The empty frame denotes, in this way, a *thematic conception of existence*—which simply means that aspects remain in accord and are forgotten or else de-

emphasized as aspects. Cora's lawyer remains mute, even though he is capable of saying otherwise. The frame does not belong to him, even though he is featured within it in a prominent way. He both observes and is observed by the limits of the advice given and the advice taken, which now form a given horizon. In other words, the lawyer participates in the advice that gives continuity to the possible, even though he could do otherwise.[14] He is seeable in what is possible as one who remains in accord and also as one who might not remain so. In this respect, the possible has to be understood as a way of seeing and as the coming to presence of what can be seen, even though what is seen is not all that is there to see. And what comes to presence does not do so in an essential or original way. What comes to presence in an experience of the possible are aspects drawn in a similar way, even though there is always more before us and more that lies in wait, which is not on view because not appropriable. If something is not appropriable, we cannot say of it that it does not exist.

This is how the possible comes to be a question of advice—a question about how advice contributes, in particular, to the maintenance of the possible, which we have now identified as a way of seeing that begets a way of doing, and this way of doing is predicated on what came before and can thus be trusted to come again in the same way, if it is maintained as such. We seek advice precisely because we can see what might remain resistant to appropriation, the discontinuity of which might very well become the source of our ruin. The possible, in other words, is only at variance with the real if the conditions of possibility fail to be both met and sustained. This would be, presumably, a potential source of regret, since the possible is what works. Typically, we do not regret what works, only what failed to work. We crave the possible as a solution to a regret that we can only anticipate and never know, since in choosing the possible, we opt for what has worked at least once before.

By contrast, regret is more closely aligned with the impossible, insofar as regret leaves us in a state of attunement to what is not yet. Or else regret indicates the aspects that have not been featured thematically, even if they have appeared at the very same time as something linked, both thematically and independently, to other phenomena that do more than merely participate in the consistency of what is given. If a given phenomenon can be said to *con*sist, then it exists with something else at the same time—with something that can be recognized as different, or is in possession of aspects that may very well be featured in an altogether

different theme than the one in which it *also* appears, even if never to us. If so, we will never be able to say that this or that theme is a reality, nor even a contingent totality, since it will remain inextricable from the aspect of itself that is featured in an unrelated theme. A theme, we might say more simply, is merely one more way of fashioning continuity from what also remains—at least potentially—in some other relation of continuity and does so in or at any time whatsoever.

Regret gives us access to what is not yet featured thematically by virtue of the awareness we now have that what has passed us by was merely something possible, even if the possible comes to us, as Blanchot suggests, as an empty frame. By contrast, we can see that aspects gathered thematically, producing a sense of continuity—or possibility—are what regularly appear to us *as* reality, so much so that we fail to recognize the thematic character of perception, which prevents us from doing something, anything, to or with what appears. Without regret, we often (and wrongly) understand ourselves to exist in the realm of the nonvoluntary relation. The thematic arrangement of aspects in an empty frame is what assures us that a use of our will shall not be necessary, since what appears works. This is what Frank decides, for instance, when he wakes up from a coma with the DA at the foot of his bed.

For this reason, I contend that regret—if the feeling is not submitted in haste to advice, or if regret continues to haunt the advice we nevertheless receive—shares something important not only with the impossible but also with reality conceived as the impossible. One might look to Theodor Adorno's conception of utopia, which he articulates in a much-considered passage from *Negative Dialectics*, for a theorization of the impossible as an experience that provokes advice as a form of relief in the possible. Adorno writes, "Utopia is blocked off by possibility, never by immediate reality; this is why it seems abstract in the midst of extant things. The inextinguishable color comes from nonbeing. Thought is its servant, a piece of existence extending—however negatively—to that which it is not."[15] If advice is, as I have argued, an instance of the possible, then the advice we receive could never appear to us as something "abstract in the midst of extant things"—or what Adorno calls utopia and what we might regard as thinking. It should be said that what features, as an extant thing, for Adorno, is nothing phenomenal, or at least nothing durably and persistently present to any perceiver whatsoever. It is a way of seeing and also a contingent—if habituated—order of the social, at least

in terms of its thematic manifestation.[16] The possible is more abstract than the abstraction described in more favorable terms by Adorno, even if it comes to sense (or *as* sense) more quickly and completely than does "immediate reality." In the terms of my argument, the possible—which is extended to us in the advice we receive—allows us to go on not thinking, since the cost of not thinking seems surprisingly small, save for the fact that what appears in a thematic arrangement of aspects in the empty frame of the possible is merely an "extant thing." And if the possible is an extant thing, as Adorno proposed, and advice is what holds us within the possible, then what we so regularly describe as an extant thing, or even materiality as such, is significantly less enduring and durable than we are most often wont to believe. This is also why the possible is so difficult, because it appears to us as a material thing—indeed, as the very ground and immediacy of materiality itself. Why else is it so difficult for us to define materiality if not for the tautological nature of the possible? This should not, however, ask us to relegate thinking or the impossible to an ideality, precisely because an ideality supposes a regulated form, for and of appearance, which is itself a tautological conception of materiality.

Why, then, do we seek advice? Especially if everything is always right there before and beneath us. Let us say, with some amount of sympathy, that advice is the preliminary step we take in order to make sense of the abstraction that has us in a state of worry about immediate reality. It demands that we make a decision, or enables one, about how to participate in a world that we cannot comprehend. This happens even though our participation has been beckoned by a social abstraction, or else by an abstraction that will become—once we commit to it—an at least partial order of the social, which will in turn block our access to immediately reality. We seek advice when the ground opens, or when we believe that it is about to. When the ground opens we grasp for what once was, since it seems to have worked, so much so that I never thought about it. Until I do.

We can now say that we typically seek advice, in such cases, from people we assume to be in possession of an experience strongly related, if not identical, to the one that now lays before me—hence the always at least minimal social dimension of every instance of advice. I hope that the experience of my advisor and one of the options that I am currently considering can be understood as identical, or at least thematically relevant, which is also the very point at which things begin to go wrong. I

expect that not only will my advisor have my best interests in mind, but also that he or she will know what it is that I do not yet know; and I do not know it since, up until now, the option before me has never been available, never been possible. Rather, the option that now appears has never had the opportunity to be possible. As such, the option before me has only the opportunity to be possible, since I do not yet recognize it. Thus, I am compelled to trust my advisor. I depend on him to be a seer. However, if my advisor is a seer, it is not the case that I expect him to be a visionary. Rather, I expect him to resemble the seer that one finds in the definition given to the concept by Heidegger in "The Anaximander Fragment," where we will have the occasion to understand the possible as a problem of seeing that stems from guidance. As Heidegger's conception of the seer will make clear, the endurance of the possible depends entirely on the advisor and advice. Or as Heidegger put it, "Only when a man has seen does he truly see. To see is to have seen. What is seen has arrived and remains for him in sight. A seer has always already seen. Having seen in advance he sees into the future. He sees the future tense out of the perfect."[17] To have seen *truly*, in other words, is to not have seen at all, or to have seen only once, even if I go on seeing. This is why Heidegger addresses the seer as the one who sees "the future tense out of the perfect." *I have just seen. I will continue seeing what and how I have just seen*. What, then, could it mean for the seer to give advice? And what will become of the trust I extend to the one who gives that advice?

In one sense, the advisor can only act in good faith, since what appears to him will do so in a familiar way, and what I am in search of, in fact, is familiarity. Put this way, my advisor has no compelling reason to abstain from giving me advice. He cannot act in bad faith since faith, as we know, is predicated by doubt, and he will be in no position to have experienced doubt since what he sees—what he has only ever seen—works. Put differently, my advisor has no idea that what he is, in fact, is an idealist. It is what leads the giver of advice to believe that he is acting pragmatically, when in fact, he is adrift in a realm of ideality or mere possibility.

If it can be said, especially if we stay with Adorno for a little while longer, that my advisor is incapable of genuine thinking, then what good could come of me and my situation should I follow his advice? On the one hand, if I have sought advice it may very well be the case—though it is not necessarily the case—that I'm not willing to carry on thinking, if thinking implies a mode of attunement to that which remains abstract in the midst

of extant things. More of us are satisfied to be told what to think than are willing to admit it. If so, then I shall also have no reason to complain if my advisor wills for me in a deceptive or evasive way. I may not even notice. On the other hand, my advisor cannot, as I've suggested, advise in bad faith. In this respect, the possible, most generously considered, is the blind spot of altruism, insofar as our appeal to the possible delivers us to a master, even if the one who appears does so in good faith. The advice works, because it has only ever been possible, and now I can carry on without regret. But if I carry on without regret, then I remain perfectly oblivious to the non-necessity of the path that I have chosen. Indeed, if one of the options before me appears certain, then I have not chosen at all. Advice is possible, but the cost of its possibility is the absence of "me," insofar as doing what the other has done prevents me from seeing anything other than what the other has seen.

A good example of this is in the success we might find in so-called mentor networks, although anyone whose job it is to field questions within a bureaucratic structure will do the very same work.[18] If my mentor's intervention in a field of study—the "once" of his seeing—opens up an area of inquiry that I now pursue, there is every chance that you will recognize me as the student of my mentor, so much so that if you are seeing me for the first time you are more likely to refer to me as the student of so-and-so rather than by my own name. There will be no reason for you to say otherwise. The work that I do was made possible by the work of my mentor and will rightly go by their name, even if I'm the one who has done the writing. Moreover, because I accepted the advice my mentor gave many years ago, I have been given access; I have become visible as a result but visible as a constellation of signs that most strongly indicate someone and something else. I participate in a realm of the visible even though I myself will never be seen. To appear I must submit to the conditions of disappearance. I will have become thematically organized. I will be seen, but always in the image—or generalized aspect—of someone else.

The question, then, splits in two directions. As the recipient of advice—which we seek in an effort to forestall regret—we will need to know what it means to trust. This is especially important since if what I receive is possible, and what is possible also feels extensive and immediate, then I may no longer have any questions. But in order to understand trust, we will also need to know what it means to give.

To what extent can we say that advice—as an expression of the possible—is also given? What will it mean to heed or dwell within a given? If the given is what I seek, and I do so from the one who gives, what will become of my trust? If I am to receive the gift of advice, in what will my trust consist?

THE GIFT OF ADVICE

In *Philosophy of Exaggeration*, Alexander García Düttmann offers a conception of trust that importantly complicates the problem of the possible as I have sketched it. That is, I have described the possible, when in the form of advice, as something that feels only generous and expansive when access to a generalized way of seeing, and also of being, comes as the very gift of advice. García Düttmann reminds us instead that "trust is haunted by the doubt that it likewise assimilates."[19] If I trust my advisor, then presumably I have overcome the doubt I once had about my advisor's capacity to know and to act in an altruistic manner. What my characterization of the advisee supposes, up to this point, is that the assimilation of doubt in the experience of trust is total. But what if the advisee finds her trust "haunted by the doubt that it likewise assimilates," as García Düttmann suggests? If trust remains haunted by doubt, then doubt will be what reminds us—even as I remain bound to the other to whom I have pledged my trust—that this relation can be otherwise. The assimilation will never be absolute. If I am haunted by the awareness that the possible can be otherwise, then what doubt features, in any experience of trust, is a glimpse of the impossible, even if it feels like ruin.

The question of trust, as articulated here by García Düttmann, should enable us to think about the problem of the gift—what it means to "give" advice—in a slightly different way, insofar as we understand the act of gift giving to involve an expectation of reciprocity.[20] The question of reciprocity in the gift is troubled by two seemingly incompatible understandings of what it means to give and, in turn, to heed givenness—which is also a way of thinking about an incompatibility that pertains between certain strains of phenomenology and deconstruction. In a phenomenological tradition, if I say that something is given, then I am referring to something that exists or carries on with or without my intervention. Jean-Luc Marion has described the phenomenality of givenness, in this regard, as "presence thought in

terms of subsistence," which is to say, what remains present in a state of consistency at a minimal level.[21] In this respect, to refer to something as a given is to say that something exists in a state of necessity, and thus my relation to what is "given"—even as mere subsistence—could only be described as nonvoluntary, since whatever happens or appears will do so with or without me. That relation could only be described as involuntary if I come to realize that I could have done something and yet chose not to.

If it seems strange to consider the concept of *givenness* in terms of the will, then one need simply consider the problem of the gift as a question that concerns the economy of signs, which is what Derrida articulates most forcefully in *Given Time: I. Counterfeit Money*. For Derrida, the reciprocity demanded in the acceptance of the gift, which is a debt that only enlarges and can never be paid off, has to do with the duty the donee feels, and ceaselessly observes, to the political economy instituted by the donor and what that donor gives. What the phenomenologist calls givenness—whether one means, by this, the bracketing of reality or, in Marion's terms, that which subsists in a minimal way—Derrida considers the political economy of the sign, or the apparition of what appears. It is, for example, what lies behind Derrida's critique of Husserl's conception of intuition as the "originary donating intuition (*gebende Anschauung*), the one that delivers up the thing or the sense themselves, in person or in flesh and blood, as people still say, in their immediate presence."[22] If intuition is given—if it is *donating*—then what appears, what seems to exist in person as flesh in blood in an immediate way, will do so only insofar as it has been filtered by the possible, or the empty frame. Therein lies Derrida's important critique of phenomenology as an ideality, a lesson that is today almost entirely unheeded in the contemporary zeal for the non-correlated object and the "for us" relation we are said to maintain only foolishly.

Derrida's thinking about the political economy of the sign is in this way importantly linked with a conception of the possible as a mode of visibility, especially insofar as the gift involves both a transaction and the symbolization of that transaction. This is what preserves the terms of the economy established in the successful exchange of a gift, from which the donee will never get free.[23] Ordinary language, for instance, can symbolize and make visible as a representation that we nevertheless forget—even in the very act of employing it—the extent of what is given in, or given to, a particular economy. Derrida furnishes the following example: "I would say in French that a window '*donne* sur la rue,' it gives [*donner*,

in French, is 'to give'] onto the street (understanding by that, I suppose, that it gives visible access to, and so forth)."[24] In other words, the giving of the visible is contained in a phrase one regularly uses without thinking. And the phrase describes a space of visibility that must be purchased even though what is purchased can never be owned. In more literal terms, the expression also indicates an empty frame that can be seen through. It is what we might just as typically call a "selling feature," which as we know, always costs more. If the expansiveness of the given costs more, then I will be required to participate in an economy in an abiding way if I am to afford what I most want to see, which is the extension of visibility itself. Likewise, I will have to know already what to ask for as a condition of what I might be asked to pay. For me, the view is possible, and my access to the possible is "owed" to the conformity I have demonstrated to that economy. The possible is not for me alone. Whoever chooses this room will see what I have seen and will have been able to do so by virtue of participating in a related economy. The window marks the continuous extension of visibility (as givenness) and symbolizes an economy in which I have already agreed to participate.

Considered more directly in the terms of my argument, this is what the work of advice also involves, insofar as my advisor is a seer and what he gives is the gift of his insight. I accept it because it has been known to work (why else would I have asked him?), and nothing else seems very clear. For Derrida, reciprocity is linked to a system of credit, which, in terms of advice, becomes more expressly a problem of attribution or accreditation. If we return to my example of the academic advisor, we can now say that to accept the advice of my advisor—to do what he tells me I should do, which is what he would do—then I will credit my advisor with whatever insights I "discover"; this will give an economic advantage to my advisor, who will carry on accumulating citations that will be quantified as cultural capital, which become, for him, real money. What I get in return is nothing more than what I already have: continued visibility without advance. I persist as the same in a state of indenture, since I can never pay off what I continue to use. The question of advice, then, involves a problem of political economy in precisely the way that Derrida imagines it, but my way of dealing with that contract and the prospect of permanent indenture will be different from what Derrida imagined, especially where the question of doubt is concerned.

For Derrida, the way out of the phenomenality of the gift as a binding

and destroying contract is to imagine what an impossible gift might consist in. One of Derrida's primary suggestions along these lines involves a simultaneous act of forgetting in the giving and in the receiving of the gift, which constitutes an "aneconomy," by which no less than two remain bound in ways that never become apparent to the other and thus subject to exchange in an indebted way. I quote Derrida's proposal at length:

> As the condition for a gift to be given, this forgetting must be radical not only on the part of the donee but first of all, if one can say here first of all, on the part of the donor. It is also on the part of the donor "subject" that the gift not only must not be repaid but must not be kept in memory, retained as a symbol of sacrifice, as symbolic in general. For the symbol immediately engages one in restitution. To tell the truth, the gift must not even appear or signify, consciously or unconsciously, *as* gift for the donors, whether individual or collective subjects. From the moment the gift would appear as gift, as such, as what it is, in its phenomenon, its sense and its essence, it would be engaged in a symbolic, sacrificial, or economic structure that would annul the gift in the ritual circle of the debt. The simple consciousness of the gift right away sends itself back the gratifying image of goodness or generosity, of the giving-being who, knowing itself to be such, recognizes itself in a circular, specular fashion, in a sort of auto-recognition, self-approval, and narcissistic gratitude.[25]

Curiously, what Derrida's proposal involves is not so much an abrogation of the will as it is a demand that we forget what we have done just as soon as we have done it. We are meant to prevent any use of our will from coming to consciousness, either as something we have done or else as the thought of something we might do. If giving is an instance of willing, then presumably signification is where the will goes awry, insofar as sign or symbol gives rise, as Derrida indicates, to a narcissistic loop that assimilates everything in the image of its own desire. As that which is secured by the symbol, the political economy of the gift is akin to Wittgenstein's notion of "aspects of generalization," where, as I have already suggested, aspects remain organized in a thematic way for the sake of existence. For Wittgenstein, recall that experience implies nothing phenomenal, or at least nothing that inheres in an object as expression. "Experience" refers instead to a technique for living that has been mastered and quickly forgotten once mastered, so much so that the aspects remain but are

no longer recognized as aspects. Once the dimming of the sign in our consciousness occurs, what remains is not immediate reality, in the way that Adorno imagined it, but *technique*, which now comes forward euphemistically as "existence." What for Derrida is an image of freedom that consists in the showing of no signs, is better understood, I contend, as an economy of the aspect that can no longer be negotiated, since what was aspectual in the aspect fades in forgetfulness. With respect to Derrida's scenario, then, we are not free, if being free means being outside of an economy. Rather, it is merely that we no longer think about the eventuality of indenture, even though tethered we remain. The forgetting that Derrida proposes here might be said to prevent the expansion of the possible or even of a given political economy, but that is something very different from what it would mean to live without relation or without any economy whatsoever. In Derrida's proposal, we merely settle for one last economy, which one could only—and wrongly—come to understand as a nonvoluntary relation in the forgetting of the signs that can nevertheless not be isolated from the gift, just forgotten. If merely forgotten, then what stands as an instance of the impossible, because beyond utility or exchange, is not so terribly different from an instance of the possible that has become sedimented. When an aspect becomes sedimented, the "as if" of the aspect does not disappear so much as absent itself by turns from the reflective activity. Seen this way, the impossible is not so much an aneconomy as it is a forgetting of signification that forged a social relation that now feels like second nature, or a nonvoluntary relation.[26]

Curiously, Derrida's theorization of the aneconomy of the gift is itself concerned with a generosity that can be said to derive, in its worst instances, from a "natural power." If generosity finds its source in nature, then it is, presumably, a resource drawn from necessity that has no bearing on the will. If one is generous "by nature," if one is "naturally generous," then the will shall have no role in any act of exchange. Derrida puts it this way:

> Would a gift that proceeds from a natural power, from an originary aptitude for giving, be a gift? Simultaneously, we come around to dissociating the gift from generosity in a paradox the full rigor of which must be assumed. If it is not to follow a program, even a program inscribed in the *phusis*, a gift must not be generous. Generosity must not be its motive or its essential character. One may give *with* generosity but not *out of* generosity, not so as to obey this originary or natural

> drive called generosity, the need or desire to give, regardless of the translations or symptoms one may decipher in it.[27]

If one gives *out of* generosity, as Derrida supposed, one gives only what is possible—what is derived from an infinite reserve of what is renewably the same. By contrast, to give *with* generosity is to give in an unconditional way, which in the context of Derrida's argument is to give without signification or memory. Rather, the giving always signifies, but if it is done *with* generosity both the donor and the donee must forget what was given and what was received. But what difference does the difference in preposition, here, actually make—especially if both are retained and said to occur simultaneously? If a giving *of* implies a form of giving that is conditioned—that is, if the gift is both something useful and also a working symbol of indenture—then what would it mean to give *with* instead? Does not giving "with" merely imply giving alongside of a giving that is conditioned? In other words, if we are giving *with*, then we are giving in addition to what will nevertheless have been given *of*. What was given *of* will take on the character of givenness.

The forgetting that follows the unconditional "with" poses greater problems for thinking about the givenness of things, in a phenomenological register, than is necessary. In the best instance, generosity merely comes to imply a givenness that appears to us as something that was never instituted, and thus it can neither compel my gratitude or indenture, nor can it fortify the coffers of the giver. Unconditioned generosity, thus construed, is way of acting *as if* what appears as given in fact has no origin, that there was no moment of institution that we might consider or imagine in relation to its co-present aspects. Hence Derrida's stipulation: "As the condition for a gift to be given, this forgetting must be radical not only on the part of the donee, but first of all, if one can say here first of all, on the part of the donor."[28] In making the qualification, "if one can say here first of all," Derrida speaks about origin in terms of contingency rather than necessity. And yet, what forgetting in this instance produces is an image of givenness that only thoughtless-ness can manage, however paradoxically it may be to manage something that is impermissible to thought. The will exists, in such a scenario, only insofar as it can produce a forgetting that allows us to live with no further forms of indenture. In the move from a political economy to an aneconomy, then, we might very well find ourselves freed of obligation, but the cost of that freedom is also

a supposed nonvoluntary relation to what appears, which—in terms of my larger argument—also means no more regret and thus no further opportunities to see otherwise. I will live with what was lost as an experience of freedom.

Put differently, if something is merely given, then I shall have no reason to be grateful. I cannot be given access to what is given, nor can I acquire it. In this respect, the distinction between "giving of" and "giving with" that Derrida introduces here as a question of generosity returns us to the very problem he rightly notes about Husserl and phenomenological givenness to begin with. Giving "with" re-creates the donating intuition by other means, and it does so, ultimately, in an effort to think about an economy without signification (in the form of symbolization), on the understanding that symbolization is a binding and destroying pact. But what is it about the gift that leads Derrida, of all thinkers, to try and move beyond or beneath signification?

One of the problems, in my estimation, has to do with the absolute character of a distinction commonly made between conditional and unconditional acts. If an exchange is conditioned, the logic seems to go, then the exchange can happen in only one way—what is intended, thereby, will always work, and the donee will always be the one who does that work and will thereby also never be the author of the work done. But as we know, intention only rarely guarantees a result. And if we can agree that intention is not a guarantee of any particular result, then why would we assume that the conditions of the gift given would be observed and reciprocated precisely as intended? By contrast, if an exchange is unconditional, absolutely nothing is expected or demanded of me in return. I can take without reflection on, or consideration of, the other from whom I have nevertheless received something. I can do whatever I like. I shall have no regrets. My will is guided by no expectation, as if the "mutual benefit" that defines reciprocity implies a determined measure and thus an inflexible economy. And yet nothing compels us to understand mutuality as identity or absolute equality. For one, if an exchange is defined by mutuality it could not be a relation of identity, at least not in the terms provided by an understanding of reciprocity as permanent indenture. If what I give back is the same as what I have received, then our exchange is not mutually beneficial; it is identical. If identical, then no giving has occurred, since giving implies at least two. There is no relation, only oneness, no matter how many. However, if our exchange is mutually beneficial, then what I

do for you will not be the same as what you do for me, but the exchange will be of benefit to us both.

An insistence on mutuality in the experience of reciprocity merely demands that we take seriously the idea that there is never just one economy, even in the one economy in which we knowingly participate. Obviously, it is easy to think of an economy as just one economy—one, moreover, that is always in service of permanent indenture, gross accumulation, and irreversible inequality. And it is to our continued peril to simply ignore the reciprocity of the credit system as global gift in the ways imagined by Derrida and readily understood as such today.[29] However, we should take just as seriously that this is also what the forgetting of the gift in the achievement of an "aneconomy" might imply. Perhaps the difficulty of thinking of any economy in terms of a reciprocity that produces indenture has only to do with the very idea of symbolization itself, especially insofar as we regard the symbol as a mode of signification by which something stands for something else in a relation that does not depend on semblance, which would render it more obviously subject to an aspect shift. And yet it is precisely because a symbol does not derive from a natural power—is not indexed to a necessary condition—that even it can be subject to a change in aspect. One need only recall the famous scene in Sergei Eisenstein's *Battleship Potemkin* (1925) in which a crazed, white-haired priest stands at the top of the ship's deck, looking down at the mutiny about to unfold. Noticing the chaos below, the priest, who is holding a cross, brings both arms into the air, at which point an inter-title reads, "Bring the unruly to reason, O Lord." From there, Eisenstein cuts rapidly between shots of the mutiny as it is about to begin and a series of close-ups of the priest, who now lifts the cross up and down across his palm to the extent that the cross now appears *as if* it were an ax. One can, of course, read the sequence in a way that follows continuously from our recognition of the cross as a symbol of Christianity and say that Eisenstein is showing us Christianity itself as a form of violence. But in order to arrive at this understanding, an aspect shift is needed, which is what Eisenstein provides with the close-up of the cross turned on its side, so much so that it reads as an ax. As a consequence of that aspect shift, a different understanding of Christianity emerges—one that depends rather ingeniously on a recognition of the aspectual dimension of the object we first call "cross," and thus on the contingency of the symbol itself. What the shift from cross (as a sign of divine authority) to ax (as a privileged

sign and mode of anti-revolutionary force) depends on is less a forgetting than a willing. That is, if we can recognize that "cross" can also function as "ax," we become aware that, above all else, signification is not tied to metaphysical coordinates or states of necessity but resides instead in the realm of the will. What we can see is that there is always more than one economy in every economy. Every economy depends on a logic of signs, but the signs themselves are always contingent and thus always capable of being otherwise, of being read and distributed in more than one way. How else to describe the way in which the very same object can express now Christian metaphysics and then an atheistic worldview? Nothing in the object changes, merely our understanding of it. A visual economy is a political economy, precisely insofar as the aspect shift that remains as a potential alternative in any given social formation indicates a way of reimagining what appears before us in more agreeable terms.

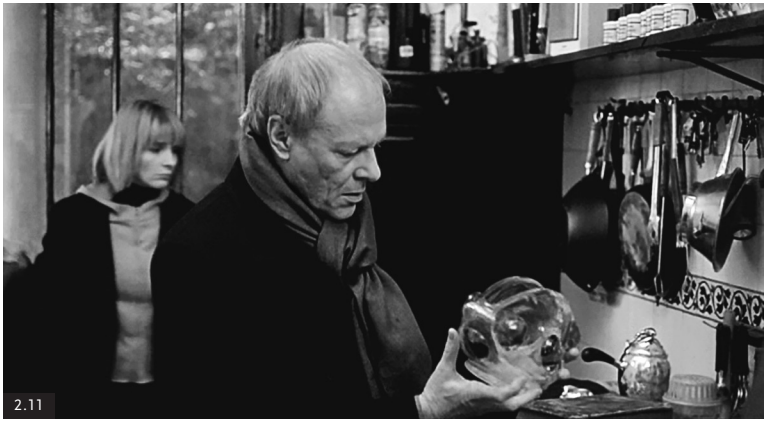
ECONOMY, ECONOMIES

One reason I use film as an example so often in this book is that what filmmakers routinely do is to show us a world we recognize but in an order we are not accustomed to experiencing. And if cinema stands as a model for the political dimension of the aspect shift—and by extension, the idea that there is always at least one more economy in every economy—that model cannot be completely removed, either, from real politics. For what cinema shows us of the world are material objects and relations reconfigured, just without the tension that regularly follows from any effort to now see this object in that place and this idea as a way of understanding those things. A striking example of this phenomenon is found in Olivier Assayas's *Summer Hours* (2008), which takes on quite explicitly the idea that there is always more than one economy in every economy, and details the national and global tensions and consequences that follow from the re-contextualizing work of aspect seeing.

In *Summer Hours*, Assayas shows one of his main characters, Frédéric, an economist, as he is engaged in a discussion of his new book on a radio talk show. The host of the show demands clarification about what he perceives to be a flaw in Frédéric's logic. Describing what he sees as the argument of the book, the talk show host wonders how as an economist Frédéric can maintain the idea that all economies are infinitely relative,

that they are always beyond prediction or control. What point would there be in being an economist, this talk show host in thrall to reason wonders, if one could not predict how any given economy will function? In other words, how can one be an authority on something that cannot be known in the same way twice? What could it mean to write books about something one claims not to understand, at least insofar as understanding implies mastery, if not epistemic verification? In reply, Frédéric avers, "I say that because an economy is the opposite of a science, any attempt to control it, no matter how well intentioned, is often capable of totally backfiring." It is not that we can do nothing, nor is it the case that our will shall be entirely exterior to the function or future of any given economy. Rather, the signs that organize any given economy can shift, be rerouted, or most compelling of all, function in more than one way in more than one economy at the same time. There is never just one economy, even when there is more than one in the one in which we now find ourselves most directly situated. What moves does so simply because signs can be read and arranged differently. What moves does so precisely because every economy is a political economy—every economy is anchored by a will to read signs in one or another way.

Assayas illustrates this point most fully in *Summer Hours* as a question of collecting, inheritance, and the gift. Shortly after we witness the heated exchange about the possibility of being an economist, which is to say, about the impossibility of every economy, Frédéric undertakes the task of disassembling his recently deceased mother's home, which features a host of paintings by his uncle, a revered impressionist, in addition to a wide array of objects and collectibles that are about to be sold to the Musée d'Orsay, with some important exceptions. Frédéric, in the end, insists that Eloise, his mother's longtime housekeeper, take something that is meaningful to her. Eloise chooses, without knowing, one of the things the Musée d'Orsay wanted most: a "Bracquemond" vase. She takes just one of many and does so precisely because she knew that the mother didn't care that much for them, hidden away as they always were. As such, Eloise assumes that unlike everything else in the house, the vase must not be worth much, which is what she tells her own son as they leave the house together one last time. What this means for the Musée d'Orsay is that they will have some Bracquemond vases, but not all of them. The collection, in other words, could never be complete. The missing piece will now remain somewhere else, out of public view, and in an entirely different economy



2.11

2.12

of signs—an economy that will be predicated alone on the nostalgic impulses of the housekeeper, who has no understanding of what the piece is worth in any other economy, even though it is also worth quite a lot of money. Likewise, when Frédéric and his wife later visit the Musée d'Orsay and see some of his mother's objects in a new context—one moreover that is assembled on the logic of the homogeneity of production and the totality of the set marked by authorship and periodicity—they see them otherwise, as material traces of an economy (of their home, of the family) that has since passed, even though the family remains together, just in a radically different arrangement (figures 2.11–2.14). Where once the family home and its effects marked a particular mode of French living—of being together as family in France *as* French—the reason to sell the house and

2.13

2.14

its effects is owed to the fact that Frédéric's brother and sister are now working in China and the United States, respectively, which is to say, in different economies, all of which affect each other, just not in the same way. And certainly not in ways that can be easily predicted or controlled.

Finally, the materiality of the objects in a process of redistribution is important, insofar as we understand them both as objects of exchange and as signs, which participate equally in no less than two different economies at once. And it should be noted that the vase received by Eloise was a gift given by Frédéric. As such, the gift given was a financial loss to the donor (and by extension, the museum, which has no idea that it was once in the offing), even though the donee gains something that she does not know to be financially lucrative. The exchange does not, however,

involve a forgetting. Rather, it involves an avowed expression of appreciation in and as exchange. What remains disavowed—or simply unknown to Eloise—is nothing forgotten or unknowable. At any point, someone could notice it—see it as belonging to another series, as one aspect of a particular aspect of generalization, to come back to Wittgenstein's term. One could then do something else with it, should Eloise need or want the money, that is, should Eloise find herself subject to an economy that she herself could not predict. It is simply that, in this instance, the aspect of the vase that appears to Eloise is one that stands for a relationship that the sign nevertheless does not resemble, and it could be seen in some other aspect and used in some other way. Frédéric gives *of* generosity, since he stood to lose what was given and also what it was worth in a different economy. Eloise received the gift *with* generosity (and it is necessary to say that we can receive something with generosity, as well), believing as she did that the vase was worth something only to her, and strictly as a reminder of the life she led for so long and with whom she lived this portion of her life: with *and* for. In receiving the gift, she intended only to minimize any potential loss to others while still preserving an aspect that worked in the economy of signs organized in and around her name.

Frédéric, of course, is not solely someone who gives a gift in a generous way, inasmuch as he stands to lose forever what he gives. As an economist, his job, presumably, is to be an advisor. The logic of exchange that I have detailed should suggest what kind of advisor he might be, which is someone other than what the dismissive talk show host imagines—in other words, any advisor who will know and deliver in the advice he gives precisely what will happen. For our purposes, let us say then that advice is a gift that participates in and creates an economy. But the economy is always more than one, and often more than one *at once*, as when the object given participates in multiple economies or fields of visibility. The gift of advice gives a way, but it does not do so conditionally, at least not in the sense of an intention that cannot fail to work or be observed without fail. Frédéric, for instance, intends something unconditional. The condition of the gift is that it be unconditional, insofar as condition here means monetization. And yet Eloise will also die at some point, potentially unmooring that object from the economy in which it will have most recently been one aspect of, and the object will find its way to another economy, the homogenizing logic of which Frédéric was all too willing to deny as the condition of what he gave. But only potentially. Eloise's son, for instance,

may hold the vase longer, include it in the economy of effects that now come to give visibility to his life in the partial objects assembled from a time (which is also more than one, even as we share an instant) that has passed, which includes something of his mother that marked a space he never inhabited.

SAMENESS AND TRUST

If there is more than one economy in every economy—and if the gift of advice has something economical about it—then we have reason to return to García Düttmann's suggestion that "trust is haunted by the doubt that it likewise assimilates." If I trust my advisor to be a seer, I believe that my advisor knows more than I know but remain skeptical about what I might hear. And I do this despite the fact that I have exposed myself, my future, to his way. The risk, of course, is what was established early on: namely, that I may only contribute to the once of my advisor's seeing. However, if "trust is haunted by the doubt that it likewise assimilates," then assimilation can never be total, irreversible, or shot through by a condition that is unshakable in its necessity. The gift of advice can very well be an invitation to an economy. However, if that gift demands reciprocity in the form of indenture—if the conditioned gift means that it must be just this one way—then our doubt will comprise whatever else it is that we begin to see, even as we remain in the ligature of the possible. In order to have doubts, even in an experience of trust, I must be capable of seeing another aspect in the same sign. Moreover, if "trust is haunted by the doubt that it likewise assimilates," then assimilation itself could never be associated with the possible as the once of seeing, since assimilation implies a way of being with others in an agreeable way without disavowing the differences that remain between us, and for however long.

And let us not forget, if I offer my trust, I do so precisely because I find myself in a state of concern about what I perceive to be something that I want or need but have no known way of ascertaining that thing. At least, I have no way before me that I have previously known for myself. The same will be true of a bureaucrat in any institution, from whom and from which I have sought an answer that will alleviate the suffering I feel. It is a problem I experience as something that I cannot seem to fix, so much so that I am beginning to forget what it was in the first place. And if I forget

what it was that I demanded of the bureaucrat, or the advisor, it is not freedom that I will experience, even if I now appear to meet the condition of living without relation or signification. Likewise, what I regularly want from the bureaucrat or an advisor—even if I assume that what I will be shown is an instance of dissimulation or obfuscation—is that he show whatever he shows me in a continuous way. However, if I am assimilated to the once of my advisor's seeing—which could only follow from the trusting affirmation of my advisor, whether my mentor or the bureaucrat before me—then that trust may very well carry me along to the point at which I begin to sense, but do not give sway to, my own disappearance as a condition of knowing something continuously. Put differently, doubt is a memory with no particular content, beyond the awareness that it compels in us of a forgetting exacerbated by the possible as a way of knowing something continuously.

It is important to emphasize here that if trust is haunted by a doubt that it likewise assimilates, then it does not necessarily matter if the advisor or bureaucrat we have before us is one who intends to feature an obfuscation in response to my request. That is, I take for granted that the bureaucrat, just like the advisor—the altruistic mentor—can intend to offer me solutions, whether as access to the supposed transparency that persists between bureaucrat, bureaucracy, and institution, or else as the gift of flexibility in matters of policy that the bureaucrat may himself find oppressive. That is to say, what if we were merely to act *as if* we trusted the bureaucrat whom we nevertheless suspect of a having a will to obfuscation, and who is no less concerned to offer me advice than the one from whom I expect only benevolence? If we can agree that there is no reason to assume that the bureaucrat is incapable of thinking, which is what our rage at bureaucratic obfuscation otherwise implies, then we have every reason to entertain the *as if* of trust, at least so long as we still do not know whether or not our trust is warranted. If we think the bureaucrat is incapable of thinking, then we can just do the opposite of what he advises us to do. But as I've suggested, what this means is that we will just have done what was asked of us, since there was never any expectation that the job we do or refuse to do bears any relation to the bureaucrat's intention, which could only be encountered obliquely or as what withdraws from whatever it has also made present. In this respect, we have every reason to stay with—to think with—the bureaucrat in a continuous way. It will just depend on how we begin to think about the problem of continuity.

The challenge for us emerges precisely when we consider what it would mean to allow *doubt* to retain the same capacity to indicate an otherwise, even in the face of the bureaucratic dissimulation that has left me convinced of the nonvoluntary relation, and even if that nonvoluntary relation is nothing more than an involuntary relation that appears to me as an enforced necessity. Obviously, I do not mean to suggest that we should regard the bureaucrat as simply benevolent and thus undeserving of our doubt. Rather, there is something in the experience of trust that remains instructive as a mode of resistance, especially if we consider that our regular experience of doubt involves a belief that what we remain with, or else what we would like to occur, may not be permissible. To become conscious of our trust, which follows from an experience of doubt, is to be aware that we are turning over a portion of our will to the one we hope knows something that we do not wholly comprehend. We become conscious of our trust only when the alternative seems obviously undesirable, even *if* it were possible. By the same logic, then, we can only remain in a relation of trust with the bureaucrat if we are going to remain with him—if we are going to remain importantly critical of what he does. In order to do so, we merely need to recognize that a presumption of benevolence is not a necessary condition of the experience of trust. Rather, trust can stand as an alternative to the nonvoluntary relation, which is in fact an involuntary relation stripped of the productive potential of regret as the coming to consciousness of the contingency of things that once seemed necessary. So long as trust remains haunted by doubt, as García Düttmann rightly proposes, we will have the capacity before us to do otherwise insofar as we remain privy to the logic that guides the aspectual relation of what is featured for me, even if that means something that is continuously discontinuous. What we need to understand more fully is the emancipatory character of doubt itself, so long as doubt is assimilated by trust, which allows us to stay with something just long enough to see something else. In this regard, doubt is relieved of its relation to skepticism, insofar as skepticism is informed by a nihilistic attitude predicated not on a certainty that nothing can be known or verified but instead on a belief that everything seems to fail the test of the absolute. I have in mind, here, Linda Zerilli's important suggestion that "the skeptical impulse, in its classic form, never questions the ideal of absolute knowledge that governs the dogmatic assertions the skeptic would contest; rather, it dramatizes our disappointment with the impossibility or failure of such knowledge."[30]

What such a casting of doubt allows for is a conception of continuity founded on trust even before agreement—especially if "agreement," as a euphemism for "proof," is couched in epistemological terms. That is to say, when assimilated by trust, doubt comes to stand as an inside that is always imagining an outside should a relation of trust show itself to be no longer in good faith. Or, as the case may be, if the relation now seems to us to have been wrong from the moment it began, which is something I now regret. In this very way, regret is the affective registration of the dawning of a new aspect. In the dawning of a new aspect, we no longer agree to call something by the same name. When we no longer agree to call something by the same name—when my doubt, or yours, is no longer assimilable—the dawning of a new aspect begins.

In this respect, trust bears just as important of a relation to sameness as it does to doubt. Trust indicates how sameness implies agreement but in ways that make no essential claim about what inheres in the object that stands before or between us. One of the most compelling discussions of the problem of sameness—especially in this context—is to be found in Stanley Cavell's "Knowing and Acknowledging." There, Cavell introduces an important example for reckoning with what it means to say that we share something, that we share the same thing—whether we share one object between us, or else the same object multiply produced. He provides an example that concerns the make of a car—in this case, a 1952 MG-TD—and arrives at two incompatible statements about identity. He writes, "To say we own the same car . . . is to say that there is one car we own. (What makes it the same is its physical integrity, so to speak.) To say we have the same car is to say that my car is the same as yours (both are 1952 MG-TD's). That they are the same means that they are not different, anyway not different *makes*."[31] What Cavell's description of an object or objects makes clear is that "same" can imply both many and just one. The simple phrase "we have the same car" can indicate one car and two owners and also many owners of many cars that are of the same make—at once and without contradiction. Neither statement cancels the other out. It merely depends on the aspect we seize upon when we contemplate "the same." Or better to say, in a Cavellian/Wittgensteinian vein, that the difference between them is a matter of grammar. It is a matter of knowing what an ordinary usage of the word "same" between us might indicate, only to discover a new context or grammar, which compels us to arrive at a different understanding of "same." For instance, imagine that

two of us are attempting to rent a car. We might find that we have both just rented the same model, in which case there will be at least two cars in the lot—one for me, one for the other. "Same" will indicate two cars. However, if following our conversation about renting the same car—at which point we are likely still in a mutually affable, phatic relation—we arrive to the lot only to see that there is one car, then we will have learned, on the basis of this car lot that shows not two cars of this model but one, that we have misunderstood what the agent meant when he told us that we have rented the "same" car. That is to say, much to our chagrin, there is only one car between us.

It is not a question of knowing which use of "same" is right or wrong but of the context for understanding it this way instead of some other way. As Cavell puts it in "The Availability of Wittgenstein's Later Philosophy,"

> We learn and teach words in certain contexts, and then we are expected, and expect others, to be able to project them into further contexts. Nothing insures that this projection will take place (in particular, not the grasping of universals nor the grasping of books of rules), just as nothing insures that we will make, and understand, the same projections. That on the whole we do so is a matter of our sharing routes of interest and feeling, modes of response, senses of humor and of significance and of fulfillment, of what is outrageous, of what is similar to what else, what a rebuke, what forgiveness, of when an utterance is an assertion, when an appeal, when an explanation—all the whirl of organism Wittgenstein calls "forms of life."[32]

We might also add to Cavell's list of situations the idea that grammar and context are also ways of knowing when something is a matter of politics. And politics, which requires a trust haunted by doubt that it likewise assimilates, in García Düttmann's terms, may very well be the term that holds us in an agreement about "sameness" for a while longer than it takes us to acknowledge a shift in grammar. Or the moment when we are forced to say that we really will be driving the same car, that there's only one of them. This is also an indication of how advice itself can be political, even in its most altruistic instances, insofar as sameness involves a prolonged agreement to inhabit the possible as a technique of experience while thinking about a different way around the same object or objects, relation or relations.

In this sense, we might openly entertain a deception—first as trust

and then as performance—which might give politics a bad name, but what this passage from Cavell should indicate before all else is that there is no essential ground for any political claim, any more than there is "correct" usage of one word or another. Grammars depend on clarity and distinction in observation, rather than on anything essential. This is why the possible is often a political experience, a special instance of thematic existence, regardless of whether we favor or reject any given arrangement of the aspects of generalization—or what comes to us in and as advice, as a gift that has the power of indenture, just not the guarantee of it. This is also, I would suggest, how the distinction that Cavell makes between knowledge and acknowledgment is so significant to politics: "It isn't as if being in a position to acknowledge something is *weaker* than being in a position to know it. On the contrary: from my acknowledging that I am late it follows that I know that I'm late (which is what my words say); but from my knowing I am late, it does not follow that I acknowledge that I'm late—otherwise, human relationships would be altogether different than they are."[33] Human relationships, in other words, would be something other than political: *Please send my regrets*. Acknowledgment, in this sense, is related to the time of decision, less as a matter of urgency than of grammatical comprehension and also of a delay that may need to persist beyond that particular instance of comprehension.

This is why we are so often poorly served by our anger in the face of what we can only imagine as a stupid bureaucrat. It is, at the very least, reason enough to resist an impulse to rage at the bureaucrat or advisor on the basis of a certainty that depends on no grammar of comprehension whatsoever. Should we announce our disagreement—as we often do—in advance of what the bureaucrat has to tell us, he will rightfully go silent and learn all the more about what it is that we want, which is something more than he can deny us. And if I speak by rote and in rage against the bureaucrat, chances are I am revealing only my own perpetual recourse to the possible, which is what the bureaucrat knows about me already. But what if I simply agree? What if I say, instead, to the bureaucrat: You know more than I know, which indicates that we know, at the very least, the "same" thing.[34] If I do so, I can flatter the bureaucrat and do something else with the gift of advice that I receive, especially since the gift is not all that binding. The exchange merely asks that we agree, that we accept the terms. But what do I have to lose in agreeing that we share the same car? Strictly speaking, what I am agreeing to *is* impossible. If I tell my advisor

"you know more than I know," what my flattery might indicate is that he understands much less.

Isn't this where, in *The Postman Always Rings Twice*, Frank goes wrong? What if Frank really had said to the DA at the moment in which he comes back to consciousness, "You know more than I know"? For one, he would have been given more time to think about what happened and thus about what to do next (or instead). Moreover, he would not have had to expose himself to the vengeful wrath of the DA, which followed from the change of heart that he and Cora publicly and legally demonstrated when they accepted the advice of their own attorney; accepting that advice won them back their freedom, for a brief moment, but exposed them in turn to the DA's hostility, which was a result of the public humiliation visited upon him with the quick overturning of the verdict. That is, once the DA accepted the eventuality of the retracted statement, which allowed Frank and Cora to live under another's advice, he merely lay in wait for a sign that ran in excess of the limit constituted by the opposing attorney's advice. Cora died in the car crash but was not murdered. However, having Cora's admission in the form of a note she left only for Frank, the DA knew that he could force Frank to agree to murder, even though the one he actually killed was not Cora but the husband. This is why Frank says at the end of the film—realizing that he no longer has any defense against the DA and the appropriation of the sign in a different frame—that the postman always rings twice. Or, as he tells the DA from within his prison cell, "You know, there's something about this that's like, well, it's like you're expecting a letter that you're just crazy to get, and you hang around the front door for fear you might not hear him ring. You never realize that he always rings twice. What's that? Well, he rang twice for Cora, and now he's ringing twice for me, isn't he? The truth is, you always hear him ring the second time, even if you're way out in the backyard. Father. You were right. It all works out. I guess God knows more about these things than we do." Of course, the one who knows is not God but the DA. What the DA knows is simply what is possible: a way of making two deaths into one death, of making two deaths the same death, which is what they also are. The trouble for Frank is that when the doorbell rings twice, he ultimately thinks that it has rung just once, that it only ever rings just once. Should he have been capable of hearing two rings in the same ring, should he have maintained his doubt as a condition of trust (when I say that the doorbell has rung, how many times do I actually indicate?), he may very

well have been capable of the impossible. He may have been capable of seeing many and the one at the same time, so much so that he becomes capable of thinking ahead and doing otherwise. And in the end, what does Frank show us if not what Derrida suggested about the nature of confession? "Confession does not consist essentially in making the other aware of something. One can inform the other of a crime one has committed without that act thereby *consisting* of an avowal or a confession. The intentional meaning of confession supposes, therefore, that one does not confess in order to inform, to give information or teach a lesson, to make *known*. Consequence: the eidetic purity of confession stands out better when the other is already in a position to know what I confess. That is why Saint Augustine wonders so often why he confesses to God who knows everything."[35] What one confesses is strictly what is possible, which is what is already known by the one to whom a confession is made. And in Frank's case, what this particular confession makes possible is his death, about which he now seems to have no regrets. To have no regret is to live with the possible, to live as though already dead. Unless one insists a little while longer: you know more than I know.

CHAPTER THREE

The Problem of Withdrawal

If the previous chapter was something of a long pause, it was also a reflection on what pausing might come to mean. It matters little whether pausing is something we are forced to do, by either the mentor or the bureaucrat, or is something that we take upon ourselves to do in a moment of weariness. What concerns us in such occasions is that our weariness might only grow and take on the distinctness that remorse requires, which is an emotional state that stands between melancholy as hopeless repetition and regret as the mere acknowledgment of an instance of failure. As an instance of regret, as opposed to the ongoing character of melancholia, our acknowledgment also indicates that we do not expect to have an opportunity to repair or restore what has passed just as it was. And yet, if we take our regret seriously, we will become better attuned to how or when we might perceive a nonvoluntary relation as one that has the *capacity* to be described as an involuntary one, should we fail once again to see the contingency of what appears before us in the signs arranged in the likeness of necessity. And we fail to do so, as I have argued throughout, when we insist on the necessity of what appears: whether on what we perceive to be the necessarily stupid character of bureaucratic speech and appearance, or else on the necessity of our own rage at what we think cannot but be an instance of obfuscation, which is something we think we cannot stop, nor stop ourselves from railing against. In such moments, we justify our rage to ourselves as a sign of moral strength, which cannot exist unless we believe ourselves to have seen the same thing go wrong in precisely the same way more than once. We may be equally inclined to

rage against our mentor if he or she fails to keep us in the realm of the possible, when in fact their failure to do so is better understood as a gift that demands no known form of reciprocity as the continuation of the possible, even if reality comes to feel like ruin.

What I am describing here as a pause is another name for an experience of blockage that follows from the continuity of the possible. That is, a "pause," in this context, is the same as "blockage" insofar as both words describe the same arrangement of signs in the realm of the possible, or what Wittgenstein refers to as aspects of organization. It is what I refer to, in the previous chapter, as thematic existence—which has been given to us, offered to us, in and as givenness. And what exists as given is presented to us at the moment in which we both seek and accept advice in order to forestall the regret that we anticipate but have had no occasion to know for ourselves. What I intend in offering these terms as descriptively the same is merely a suggestion about how we might think with, alongside, and within the thought of another person at once, insofar as thought assumes for itself the quasi-phenomenal character of givenness, which becomes a way to carry on existing in the givenness of what is given, while also beginning, at the very same time, to orient ourselves differently insofar as we begin to reorient aspects of generalization while appearing in prolonged agreement. That is, the barely perceptible shift (perceptible to ourselves, never to others) may very well prove to be a way of feigning agreement while we decide what else to do.

The appearance of agreement will come to matter regardless of whether our half of the agreement is made in sincerity or in a state of prolonged uncertainty or even duplicity. Rather than involve ourselves in a mutual act of forgetting in a relation of givenness that results in the relation-less field of an aneconomy—such as we saw with Derrida—we have the opportunity, instead, to reactivate the contingency of the aspect as a mode of appearance that requires accuracy. What appears does so in distinction, inasmuch as it requires the recognition of the non-necessity of what it is that we think we recognize. In an experience of the possible, of givenness, the movement from the *possible* (or blockage) to the *pause* indicates the work that regret must do in silence and expressly as sustained agreement, even if only as feigned agreement. The movement from blockage to pause, then, indicates no change in the order of appearance, only in my reflections on how or why things now appear as they are, which is something I share with, or feature for, no one else. More plainly put, what

the movement indicates is a relation between feeling and willing, and between what I show and what I am now thinking. It also marks the passage from an imperfect instance of comprehension, or an instance of comprehension that remains faithful to what can only be held in place as indistinct, to a state of preparedness, in which case I stay with, and in control of, what cannot be understood. In sensing something, I sense also that I may be able to change whatever it is that provokes that feeling. It is, in this very way, the second chance that regret has always on offer. It is how regret becomes useful within the realm of the possible but only as a way out of the possible.

Put this way, regret describes the moment in which we judge differently from within the situation of an at least putative agreement. Without putative agreement, I will not be made privy to the advice of the mentor, bureaucrat, or administrator, which is not something I am obliged to take but is something I ought to know. If regret converts what is blocked (even when blockage feels like freedom) in the realm of the possible to the realization of the not-yet-knowable, then it will be important to remain in a state of repose at the very moment in which regret begins to dawn on us. Perhaps it is better to say that it will, at the very least, be important to feature repose, even if what we show is at odds with what we think. The reason for this is not, strictly speaking, to outwit the bureaucrat, administrator, or mentor at his or her own game. It is not that we are merely lying to the liar for the sake of what we need and against the needs or demands of others. Nor is it to open ourselves, as we will see further ahead, to the charge of hypocrisy, at least not in the conventional understanding of the term as the moral condemnation I begin to experience before the eyes of others for the contradictions that I fail to observe in myself.

I shall argue that hypocrisy can be understood as another name for thinking, and especially as thinking—in such a scenario—involves a withdrawal from appearance while we nevertheless remain an appearance for others. What this implies, among other things, is that if thinking is a mode of withdrawal from appearance, which is in no sense an unusual conception of thinking in continental and intuitionist traditions, then we will have to come to terms with what it means that the most common understanding of bureaucracy in the era of dispersive logics of administration and control, otherwise known as post-Fordist capitalism (if not by a variety of names), can be described in the same terms. What I want to take seriously, here, is an idea that our most compelling descriptions of

thinking bear a striking similarity to the ways in which we commonly describe instances of bureaucratic withdrawal, in which case the bureaucrat intends or means something other than what he shows. In this respect, we are assuming for the moment the bad intentions of the bureaucrat who wants only to block our access to whatever it is that will allow one to rectify a wrong that one perceives to have been done in an institution. But the same basic relation holds in the more altruistic configuration of an advisor and an advisee. If the advisee has been offered something that gives him or her a place in this or that economy of visibility and does not yet know what to make of what has nevertheless been made possible (given *as* possible), then that very same mentee may retreat in thought while remaining bound, at the same time, to what remains possible. Of course, I realize that the conjunction of bureaucratic withdrawal and the instances of withdrawal that earn the name of genuine thinking may sound heretical, or at least be hard to take. And in some cases, it may prove to be so. But I want to suggest here that the similarity that exists in the casting of thought and bureaucratic obfuscation as related forms of withdrawal presents us instead with an opportunity, regardless—ultimately—of what we assign to the motives of any advisor or bureaucrat. Moreover, it is an opportunity that our anger and our haste may prevent us from taking. For this reason, then, we will need to linger a bit longer on what good "putative" or even "merely feigned" agreement might do, expressly as an attempt to avoid the arousal of anger, suspicion, and distrust such that nothing further gets said or shown, which will lead us to consider what bureaucracy and thinking come to share as related modes of withdrawal.

THE TROUBLE WITH AGONISM

If I anger a mentor or a bureaucrat, he will likely retreat from what he has made possible at the very moment in which my dissent is registered, and he may do so for a variety of reasons. For instance, my mentor may simply perceive my rejection of what he has made possible as an expression of ingratitude, in which case I am perceived to have failed to reciprocate, in the traditional sense of the experience, what I was given, which in our case is givenness itself. That is, my advisor may not be capable of seeing me as hopelessly caught in a demand for reciprocity that is nothing more than an experience of indenture, since what he offered also worked. I can-

not account, nor be held responsible, for my advisor's capacity to adjust to signs as they shift or as they can be sorted otherwise. The risk of the possible, as I stated in the previous chapter, is that it will work forever, and thus never for me. It is the way in which experience—as something inseparable from technique—earns its exemption from time. However, if we continue to feature agreement at the moment in which we regret having submitted to what is possible, whether in earnest or ignorance, we stand the chance of remaining with what holds us or shows us—even if in the likeness of the other—such that we will be able to avail ourselves further to a decision being made for us.

In this regard, the space between blockage and pause is an important alternative to agonism and related modes of reckoning with the emergence of antagonism or disagreement in the public sphere. The space between blockage and pause works to prevent any recourse we might otherwise take to competing absolutes that could yield only violence. I have in mind Chantal Mouffe's by now influential conception of agonism, which she distinguishes from antagonism in the following way: "While antagonism is a we/they relation in which the two sides are enemies who do not share any common ground, agonism is a we/they relation where the conflicting parties, although acknowledging that there is no rational solution to their conflict, nevertheless recognize the legitimacy of their opponents."[1] For Mouffe, the difference between antagonism and agonism is the difference between an enemy and an adversary. Of the latter, Mouffe claims that "adversaries fight against each other because they want their interpretation of their principles to become hegemonic, but they do not put into question the legitimacy of their opponent's right to fight for the victory of their position."[2] By contrast, an enemy remains an enemy no matter what gets said, since whatever I say, or my enemy says, will only be regarded as nonsense, will always already be characterized as an offense. For this reason, the clash of adversaries, in Mouffe's view, "is the very condition of a vibrant democracy."[3]

As tempting as it may be to countenance such a view of adversarial relations, there is not much in the realm of contemporary political struggle, on a local or a global level, that inspires me to accept that the recognition of an adversary's legitimacy is likely to take place. I am inclined to say, instead, that "the adversary" is merely the formal recognition of the soon-to-be enemy, which is also the moment in which my opponent disappears before me and refuses further conversation, but not further pronounce-

ment, which means that we are well past the point of acknowledgment, well beyond conversation. What Mouffe's theory describes is something like a public expression of a collective instance of moral perfectionism, in which we decide—and precisely as a political constituency—to clarify ourselves to ourselves and, most importantly, to our adversaries, such that the goodness of my will, or the collective will, is apparent even though its use will negate the other's demands. I take congressional deadlock in the United States and the return to a nationalist fervor about separatism, whether in the varied claims for the disaggregation of the European Union or else in the aggressively aggregative force of ISIS/ISIL in the Middle East, to be a clear sign that we have never been more remote from the realization of agonism.

These examples also suggest, on both a domestic and an international register, what Aletta Norval describes in *Aversive Democracy* as the problem that pertains in Mouffe's formulation of the relation between antagonism and agonism, insofar as the former is necessary to the establishment of a new political order based on a perceived lack in the existing order of the social, to which one responds negatively, *adversely*. Norval writes,

> But is it possible both to assert and maintain the primacy of antagonism, *and* to argue for its domestication in adversarial relations? This route is promising only if one divides the terrain in which the different forms of antagonism appear. Antagonism (proper) would occur in the constitution of the political field as such; it would accompany *any* political regime, including also (but not exclusively) that of democracy, while the agonism could be reserved to capture moments of antagonism occurring within the already constituted domain of the democratic regime. In the former case, there is *no* shared symbolic space since it is precisely a symbolic space that is being instituted, while in the latter one assumes the existence of space and proceeds to analyse the relations that obtain between democratic citizens. There are, however, two potential difficulties with this account. First, it lacks a clear conceptualization of the movement from one set of relations to another; there is no discussion of the transformation of "enemies" into "adversaries." Second, the characterization of adversarial relations is now argued to be about differences within a common space.[4]

In other words, the institution of a new political order—as an instance of radical politics—depends upon an enemy that is also a lack and must

remain one. As long as what is instituted persists, there is no way, as Norval points out, to imagine how one might become an adversary at some point, having been an enemy in the first place, which is also what one needs in order to sustain the social order instituted against its very name. Presumably, the adversarial space of agonism would collapse by virtue of the structural transformation it seems nevertheless to require. The problem, at least in part, has to do with the very notion of "radical" politics, where we might be better served think about aspect change. Or as Norval suggests, "It is crucial that one acknowledges this moment of change [i.e., the moment in which we admit that we think or do something differently], since without it there is no way for accounting for the very institution of a new political grammar. . . . This should not be treated as a radical break, but as a rearrangement of elements that makes possible a new way of seeing something."[5] In Norval's account, and on a slightly more pragmatic register, we have to be able to countenance our opponent, whether he or she goes by the name adversary or enemy, as inhabiting the same space but in a different way than we ourselves choose to. Put differently, if the exclusion of the enemy is a matter of absolute spatial delimitation, or permanent partition, then one has no access to what or whom one hopes to change, or to simply bring to the less vitriolic condition of respectful disagreement.

If a change in aspect is going to occur, then our perception of a lack can be notional—representational, even—but it cannot be structural, insofar as the passing from enemy to adversary requires the institution of a new world, even as we understand a world to be something less than a totality, something less than a plane of immanence. And it is not very likely that opponents are going to come to a genuine agreement or an unmediated comprehension of what it is that we demand.

Our ordinary experience of politics today, it seems to me, tends more in the direction of absolute, unwavering conviction than it does toward respectful expressions of disagreement, to the extent that what matters to so many—as a political value—is incompetence as a measure of political innocence.[6] To be uninformed, in such a world, is to be less corruptible, as if the vitality of a democracy is best realized as something that will happen with the least amount of interference, with the least amount of informed conversation. In a culture that regularly speaks of an information economy, an "informed" conversation is tantamount to nothing: there is so much information that none of it matters more than anything else.

For these reasons, I think we are better served by taking a slightly dimmer view of human motive, but not of human potential, as the starting point for the elaboration of an emancipatory theory of political change, which is exactly what a theory of regret promises. My mentor might be my friend, but he may also prove to be my enemy, if "he" is the limit of "me." Likewise, the bureaucrat may very well be my enemy, but it might be the case that he is merely my adversary. The point here is that I will only ever know if I continue to sustain agreement, live in and with what each makes perspicuous as an order of the social. Otherwise, I could be proven wrong too soon, or ruled out in advance by my own assumptions, by what I feature for others as a constant expression of my own political values, which cannot be put into conversation with radical disagreement, since the first step in the achievement of agonism involves the total rejection, rather than assimilation, of the enemy.

KEEPING UP APPEARANCES

In sustaining the appearance of agreement, as we move from blockage to pause, we have an opportunity to reorient the aspects that have been made available to us precisely because we carry on *as if* we are still in the position of the advisee, in which case no threat of antagonism is registered while we also seek a way out. What I am describing as the movement from blockage to pause—in which nothing changes except what I think, or begin to think, about what appears—is importantly related to what Stanley Cavell describes as the experience of what goes missing in the ordinary, or "the ordinary as what is missable."[7] And it is, in its own way, an important theory of the aspect.

I have in mind the distinction that Cavell makes in "Something Out of the Ordinary" between a performative utterance, which he importantly describes with respect to Austin's influential theory as "an offer to participate in the order of the law," and a passionate utterance, "an invitation to improvisation in the disorders of desire."[8] The performative utterance, so conceived, is importantly related to the possible as the once of seeing, insofar as what I become in declaring something for myself or of myself may be something that I already recognize, something that most everyone will recognize: *I now pronounce you husband and wife*. I become what the words say but only because they have been said before, have been proven

to work. I recognize what it is that I will become, just as you recognize what becomes of me in saying what has been said. In this way, the performative utterance mimics, as the expression of a law, an essential state, even if it comes to be by way of nothing essential at all.

By contrast, the passionate utterance, as "an invitation to improvisation in the disorders of desire," is provocatively described by Cavell as the movement from thinking to singing, which is modeled in the physical transition from walking to dancing. To make this point, Cavell draws on the opening sequence of Vincente Minnelli's *The Band Wagon* (1953), in which we see Fred Astaire, in the role of a superannuated Broadway performer, returning to New York after a long absence. In the opening sequence, Astaire steps off of the train at Grand Central and makes his way to Times Square. What Cavell is concerned to emphasize in the sequence is the manner in which we first see Astaire walking alongside the train toward the exit while "singing with a little self-conscious laugh" and humming rhythmically.[9] He does so as if developing a structure for which there is not yet a defining melody or lyric, and also on a low register—in terms of the volume of what he utters and also the movement of the body—such that he seems to others, in the world of this film, unexceptional. For Cavell, the humming suggests, as rhythmic, wordless expression, the work of thinking: the passionate pursuit of an idea that does not yet have form or definition, at least not as the completed song and dance soon will. In this state—still wordless, still walking—Astaire goes missing in the ordinary. He does not yet distinguish himself from others. When humming gives way to singing and walking becomes dancing, Astaire will move from participation in the order of the law (the realm of the performative, or in my terms, the possible), or what constitutes ordinary experience as a form of hovering in the familiar—in which case he is just one body among other bodies—to the ecstatic state of the passionate utterance. As a passionate utterance, the song and dance will be complete as a form now recognizable in relation to something else, but not *as* that something else. Astaire will be noticeable. He will be something out of the ordinary. If something out of the ordinary, he is both *from* the ordinary and *beyond* the ordinary at once, so long as we understand the ordinary as a sedimented order of aspects of generalization. If so, then he is not simply somewhere else. Rather, he remains perceivable as an indistinct thing that *can* nevertheless be seen. Put this way, to be out of the ordinary, as an experience of the passionate utterance, does not imply that he

or anyone else will not be seen, but rather that what we now regard as conspicuous—because thinking has become singing—will have changed.

Importantly, in Cavell's formulation, the move from the performative utterance to the passionate utterance, in which one is "singled out," depends on our standing. That is, it depends on a supposition that we have some standing and that it is perceivable, if not always namable, in its distinction. If we leave the order of the law, Cavell contends, we will need some standing, the difficulty of which is owed to the fact that "standing" is not something that we gain from the law as the simple act of leaving the law. Rather, it must come by way of the seriousness one must demonstrate in responding to, or else in realizing for oneself, a passionate utterance.

> There is (as Austin notes) no conventional procedure for appealing to you to act in response to my expression of passion (of outrage at your treachery or callousness, of jealousy over your attentions, of hurt over your slights of recognition). Call this absence of convention the first condition of a passionate utterance; and let's go further. Whether, then, I have the standing to appeal to or to question you—to single you out as the object of my passion is part of the argument to ensue. Call standing and singling out the compound second condition of passionate utterance. This compound condition for felicity, or say, appropriateness, is not given a priori but is to be discovered or refined, or else the effort to articulate it is to be denied.[10]

The compound condition, in Cavell's terms, of felicity and appropriateness is another way of casting a relation between improvisation and the work that will come of that thinking, in which coming out of the ordinary while remaining in the very place of the ordinary will be understood as appropriate. And by appropriate, I take Cavell to mean something like serious, something carefully considered with respect to what one imagines to be a worthy response to some other, despite that fact that what is worthy must also be unconditioned.

Likewise, it is important to indicate, as I just have, that the work of the passionate utterance is imaginative, precisely as a way of indicating the social dimension of imagination. In this respect, I have in mind Richard Rorty's distinction between fantasy and imagination, which he makes in expressly social terms. "To be imaginative, as opposed to being merely fantastical," Rorty contends, "is to do something new and to be lucky

enough to have that novelty be adopted by one's fellow humans, incorporated into their social practices."[11] Put this way, we could say that fantasy is still a form of thinking but a form that never becomes perspicuous for others as something that can be incorporated into a social practice. Fantasy remains concealed in the ordinary. One benefit of this distinction is that it should emphasize that fantasy has to pass over into imagination if it is to become perspicuous—this thing I now do and that others also find appealing—as an instance of the social. And in Rorty's terms, which echo Cavell's own, there must be novelty—which means that what appeals must do so without respect to a precedent that is strong enough, present enough, to assimilate the innovation under the heading of some other. Precisely as an instance of imaginative effort, as opposed to mere fantasy, the passionate utterance secures one's standing on the basis of an appeal that has no overwhelming precedent. What the distinction between a performative utterance (in Cavell) and fantasy and imagination (in Rorty) should likewise make clear is that "standing" denotes a mode of appearance that follows from a novel appeal that does not, nevertheless, come from nowhere. Rather, if the passionate utterance gives an appearance to what Astaire now uniquely does, it does not mean that he could not be seen before, as if the work of imagination were to enable one to leap from a metaphysical void. Rather, Astaire has always been seeable, just not conspicuous. To speak of appearance in this way—and when I speak of feigning appearance as well—is not to oppose appearance to reality, or to a void. An appearance is what has become conspicuous having been inconspicuous, not invisible. Or, in the case of the possible, as a mode of sustained seeing, appearance is merely what has remained conspicuous, even though there are always other ways of seeing in what shows.

In terms of the question of standing, then, we can say that it is not something we can achieve on the basis of an exact imitation of known authority, known ways of doing and being, but it cannot be wholly severed from them either. What will ultimately be identifiable as standing has first to be perceived in its indistinctness—that is, perceived *as* something distinct and yet without definite outline from within the very form that may negate the achievement of distinction itself.

To make this point, Cavell ventures what might strike one as an ethically troubling move in an effort to address the moment in which thinking has become singing, walking has become dancing. What interests Cavell, in this respect, is the moment that follows this opening scene of

The Band Wagon of humming and near-artful walking. It is a moment in which thought is beginning to take place but is not yet realized as an idea, and it takes phenomenal expression (in this instance) as dancing. In the scene that is of interest to Cavell, we see and hear Astaire as his singing begins, which happens as he trips over the feet of an African American man working as a shoeshiner on 42nd Street, leading to a pas de deux between Astaire and the shoeshiner. The ordinary act of shining shoes, and also of having one's shoes shined, is elevated rhythmically by way of the meticulous expression of the bodies together as dance and in place of acts of service, postures of authority. The dance both preserves and supersedes the ordinary actions of shining and of receiving the shine. Describing the scene as the most "elaborate and stunning in the history of Astaire scenes," Cavell says it is "one which provides him [Astaire] with an occasion for acknowledging his indebtedness for his existence as a dancer—his deepest identity—to the genius of black dancing. (How fully such an acknowledgement is acceptable is a further question, one that I hope will be considered in connection with the extraordinary details of such a routine as the one in question.)"[12] What matters for Cavell, in other words, is Astaire's movements as an explicit acknowledgment of what he owes to black dance culture—to his dance partner, to black culture, and to his audience most generally (i.e., that he tells us that he is in control of what he is doing, even if it makes us uncomfortable, which is an ordinary response to unordinary expressions). Likewise, the movements are also to be understood as an expression of his singularity, which can only be known in relation to others, even if another will now become inconspicuous—not, to say again, to become invisible or erased. That is, Astaire's movement cannot merely be a reproduction—if reproduction implies complete appropriation—of a tradition any more than any image could be said to have the ontological authority to confer on us, against our will, an identity derived in its own likeness.

From there, in Cavell's account, Astaire proceeds to dance by himself, and "as an artist whose public has dispersed, he discovers that for a comeback it is himself that must be singled out, or resingled, by himself."[13] The way that he re-singles himself—having initially singled himself out in the pas de deux—is to take a photo of his feet in a photo-booth; an image of himself that exists for others leaves his hands at the moment of the camera's automatic registration of the performance. About this, Cavell adds, "That the discovery of intact existence here [that foot and body remain

together, that the dance is coherent even though until then unknown] expresses itself as ecstasy is linked in my mind with Thoreau's once expressing his recognition of his double existence, say as seer and seen, as a condition of being beside himself, roughly the dictionary definition of ecstasy."[14] In photographing his feet, not only does Astaire re-single himself—insofar as he will have done so by virtue of the photograph he produces—such that he is both seer and what is seen, but he can do so precisely because the work, *this* work, is also acknowledged as complete in the production of a photograph and is now beyond him as something to be maintained just as it was. As photograph, the dance is now for others, as well as for him, but only in the way that others will appreciate it—as something to reckon with, to be informed by potentially, and also to tell oneself apart from, which means one could not do so unless something had once been given to one, and understood in the moment of reception as a given, as an idea about how to move. Until, that is, one learns to move on one's own. Most importantly, if the passionate utterance is, as Cavell importantly describes it, a re-singling, then what the photograph shows Astaire in the first instance is an image of what he has just done exactly as he just did it: an image *of* himself that is also now beside himself. Put differently, Astaire makes contact with himself in the form of an image as re-singling—what will become an appearance for others—which also means that he will withdraw from what is featured in the image as an instance of perfected movement, since failing to do otherwise would amount to an imitation, such that nothing like a re-singling actually takes place. What he must prove to the shoeshine is what, on another register, he must prove to himself: that he can be beside himself as an expression of re-singling rather than conjoined with something that overcomes the trace of him as something also apart from what is shared. And he will withdraw into himself again, participate in the phenomenal display of the ordinary, and begin to hum anew. It should be noted that this withdrawal, this return to humming upon completion of the photograph that gives form to lyric and movement, is not fundamentally different from what happened in the imitative dance between Astaire and the shoeshiner. What he does there he does as an acknowledgment of what he knows and why he knows it, which is what he can already do, while also preparing to do something else. The photograph is the record of that something else, a document of what the achievement of one's standing contributed to, while becoming the trace of the passionate utterance that no longer shows

what it nevertheless knows well. Or in Hegel's terms, we might say that the photograph might be described as the "daylight in which consciousness wants to display itself."[15]

Let us say, then, that standing is something that shows itself in a confident acknowledgment of what the other has accomplished, and that what has been accomplished is what I have a capacity to reproduce but choose not to appropriate, even if I have to risk—or at least venture—an imitation for the sake of what I can do for myself, in my own name. In this respect, the racial dimension of Cavell's example is telling, especially in the challenge he makes to his critics: namely, that in order to describe the scene as an appropriation rather than a respectful re-singling, one must know at least as much as he knows, since what Cavell knows is also, presumably, what Astaire knew at least that well, which is what we would have to acknowledge about Cavell's assessment, even if only to criticize it. What Cavell is saying, in other words, is that if we wish to criticize this as an appropriation of black culture by a white dancer, and not as an acknowledgment that yields a re-singling, then we will have to come to some agreement first about one of the ways that the signs have been coordinated between what Astaire did, what was or has become of a certain strain of African American performance, and what Cavell says or at least implies of them both. How else would one show one's standing? How else would an ethical critique of the image gain its force, if not by acknowledging and then bettering the specificity of what Cavell describes or Astaire does? In this way, the ethical critic must first confront the logic of what appears in its own terms—must join the work in that logic rather than submit the work to an expectation of malice derived from a repetition that we have not yet seen.

The question, then, is why we choose to act differently in our encounters with the bureaucrat, with an adversary, with someone about whom we have decided, for good or ill, that they do not think simply because they do not think the same as we do? Why presume that a bureaucrat has or expects from us, in turn, something less than standing? Doing so would imply that we have no opportunity to achieve our own standing, or admit and perceive, however indistinctly, the standing of another, which is the minimal precondition for an aspect change in the social. As Heidegger puts it in *What Is Called Thinking*?, "We should fall victim to a disastrous self-deception if we were to take the view that a haughty contempt is all that is needed to let us escape from the imperceptible power of the uniformly one-sided view."[16] One immediate solution to this

problem is to admit, in terms of an institutional struggle in which we find ourselves mired, that there is no bureaucracy in *itself*, only a logic that can be learned, made conspicuous and shared *as if* inconspicuous. We would have to admit, perhaps, in a way that is no trouble in Cavell's example but would be in our own, that the bureaucrat may actually be capable of thinking. What would be the risk? A capacity suggests nothing inevitable. If there is no bureaucracy *itself*, then each one will look and function differently from every other. And yet that difference might very well be what binds me, when I am without standing, to what I cannot help but oppose.

APPEARANCE AND WITHDRAWAL

Cavell's notion of the passionate utterance as an expression of something that comes out of the ordinary is especially relevant to our concerns with the political struggles that take place within and also about institutions. And as we will see, it is quite relevant to the work of regret, insofar as regret helps us to understand the way in which we can begin to perceive, even if only in error, the nature of our agency in any institutional arrangement. Most simply, my contention here is that we must remain tethered for some time to another—whether the altruistic advisor or an ill-intentioned bureaucrat—precisely in order to replace what has gone missing in the ordinary or else to find our way out of it altogether. This is especially true if we countenance the idea that an institution, its administration, and its bureaucrats are not in a relation of mutual determination. And if in fact they are not, then none of the three can be said to exist in a necessarily transparent relation to the other two. The instability that pertains in the constitution and maintenance of a given institution only complicates the critique we make of it, which follows from our own principled beliefs about a structure we assume to be always in place. And too often, we take our failure to find the structural relation we assume to be always present as the proof of its presence and also as proof of an attendant obfuscation that is featured for us as a veil that covers over that structure. And to be clear, I do believe this to be something that occurs, or at least can occur. It is just that I am much more concerned with what happens when we assume that a bureaucracy or institution only ever functions in this way, so much so that we might even begin to make them function this way.

For one, we would have to believe in the rational character of institutions, or what Weber described at the beginning of the twentieth century as the pyramidal form of bureaucracy, in which case everyone who participates in an institution knows how to navigate one's way through it and all have equal access to that process.[17] For Weber, it was simply a question of deciding whether one wanted to go up or down. One could choose to remain in one's station, knowing full well that alternatives exist. Put differently, the will was aided by the transparency of social and occupational norms so much so that the will itself becomes practically redundant. There would be no point in trying to distinguish between nonvoluntary and involuntary states. I do not see much evidence of this scenario any longer, if it was ever in evidence in earlier forms of bureaucracy. But let us say, for the sake of distinction, that in such a model there is, first, the structure in all of its transparency and divisions of labor and *then* there are known ways around that structure that transcend the specificity of each subject of that institution.

By contrast, if we assume that institutions and the bureaucracies that maintain them are not in a relation of mutual determination, then we have much better reason to stay with the advisor or the bureaucrat as the very way in which we might begin to access a logic of the institution that can be changed or made conspicuous, no matter what the advisor or bureaucrat intends. This is so precisely because the contingency and variability of the structure that that logic describes or enacts is not always apparent in the same way. This is also one reason why the presumed logic of bureaucratic withdrawal that produces obfuscations and then our fury might be worth entertaining, at least for a while longer, and understood in terms of what such appearances and modes of withdrawal share with thoughtfulness more than the supposedly clear instance of stupidity. That is to say, following Cavell's example—albeit in a radically different context—I want to ask what might come of the conjunction between theories of thinking and bureaucratic withdrawal? How might the time of *staying with* that pertains between conceptions of thought and conceptions of bureaucratic withdrawal offer us, to use Cavell's felicitous phrase, something out of the ordinary?

For one of the most striking features about philosophies of thinking in a continental tradition, at least—which we regularly regard as more vigilant about questions of administration, power, mechanization, and deception—is that thought is often characterized as a withdrawal from

appearance. For this reason alone, we might have reason to feign agreement long enough for our blockage to become a pause, which might produce the conditions by which a passionate utterance becomes both detectable and convincing. We cannot be heard as convincing unless we have stayed around long enough, which we can only do if we presume the other—bureaucrat or mentor—to be capable of thinking, even if we don't know, at the outset, in what ways. In other words, we might pause in the realm of the possible, since, as professed thinkers, we will also withdraw from appearance, just as the bureaucrat does.

One of the most influential theories of thinking in the continental tradition comes from Heidegger and is offered, among other places, in a series of lectures called *What Is Called Thinking?* There, Heidegger importantly makes a distinction between two questions: namely, "What is called thinking?" and "What calls for thinking?" The first question—what is called thinking?—is a demand for a definition, one that will reduce thinking to a set of known and reproducible procedures, if it can even be answered. If thinking can be learned or demonstrated, Heidegger proposed, then no thinking will occur. Any attempt to define thinking is merely an effort to submit thought to possibilization. By contrast, the second question—what calls for thinking?—points in the direction of a necessarily unnamable and un-locatable calling that instigates a withdrawal from the actual, which is itself something possible. Or as Heidegger puts it, "The event of withdrawal could be what is most present in all our present, and so infinitely exceeds the actuality of everything actual."[18] If we are thinking, as Heidegger sees it, we are beckoned by what comes to presence and nevertheless withdraws in the very instant of its appearance. The call for thinking is also a demand for a name that comes from what cannot be named, since what beckons us is also what cannot be known continuously in the same way.

Consider a fuller description of thinking as a process of withdrawal that Heidegger gives in *What Is Called Thinking?* I take it to be a paradigmatic instance in the continental tradition. It may also remind you of Joseph K.

> What withdraws from us, draws us along by its very withdrawal, whether or not we become aware of it immediately, or at all. Once we are drawn into the withdrawal, we are drawing toward what draws, attracts us by its withdrawal. And once we, being so attracted, are draw-

> ing toward what draws us, our essential nature already bears the stamp of "drawing toward." As we are drawing toward what withdraws, we ourselves are pointers pointing toward it. We are who we are by pointing in that direction—not like an incidental adjunct but as follows: this "drawing toward" is in itself an essential and therefore constant pointing toward what withdraws.[19]

To be fair, Heidegger's theory of thinking is related to his concern (typical of his late work) with technological domination, which includes the instrumentalization of thought, or the act of enframing, such that withdrawal is understood to be, in its own right, a refusal of the applied usefulness of concepts. If we read this passage as an expression of what calls for thinking, as Heidegger clearly intends, then the refusal to arrive at, or secure, what withdraws is an expression of our autonomy from an administrative order. If I read it instead as a description of bureaucratic obfuscation, in which I am always pointing in—or being pointed to—a direction that leads nowhere, then I experience not autonomy but alienation. In this case, if I am alone, I have been made to be so. And yet what binds both descriptions is a denial of political intervention; one refuses, the other is refused. Either we become capable of thinking and thus remain out of the reach of what has been instituted as an administrative order, or else we remain barred from political intervention by the very fact that the bureaucrat is the animal capable of withdrawing from what he shows. In other words, if we heed the call for thinking as something to be respected as a form of withdrawal that we nevertheless point toward, we will have no way of righting the wrong that we perceive to have been done. If we are caught in the grip of bureaucratic resistance, we expect that our search will deliver us to the encounter that we most require, which is the place where a demand can be made, the satisfaction of which will depend on an agreement about appearance. We will have to decide duck or rabbit. That is, in order to overcome a supposed instance of bureaucratic obstruction that covers over an injustice we may very well need to come to a decision about whether saying that we have the same car means that we have one car between us or that there are before us two cars that share the same make and model, to return to Cavell's example from chapter 2. We will not need to share that view forever, nor even for the same reason, but we will need to share it for some time if we stand any chance of rectifying what has gone wrong—which has gone wrong as something contingent, not necessary.[20]

Of course, one way out of this problem is simply to say that Heidegger's theory of thinking as perpetual withdrawal is itself a refusal of a particular model of bureaucratic administration that no longer applies to us. One could point to the ways in which Heidegger's theory of thinking tacitly rejects—is structurally opposed to—the pyramidal conception of bureaucracy that one finds, arguably, in both Hegel and Weber, where administrative hierarchies are largely transparent and excessively rational, so much so that one knows what ascension in a given pyramidal structure requires, and how the demands from above and below are mediated by the mid-level bureaucrat, as I suggested before. Clarity—or perhaps it is better to say consistency—is actually the problem in such a model, insofar as what is clarified is the rationalization of labor itself. For instance, in the section on "Executive Power" in *The Philosophy of Right*, Hegel imagines the bureaucrat as an elected official who clarifies the necessarily impartial demands that emanate from civil life, which is governed, he says, "in a concrete manner from below," in relation to the universal character of the state.[21] Interestingly, Hegel describes the middle sector as the "consciousness of the state" that is in possession of the most "prominent education."[22] He writes,

> Civil servants are not appointed, like agents, to perform individual contingent services; instead, they invest in this relationship the chief interest of their worldly being, both spiritual and particular. Similarly, what is imposed upon them and entrusted to them is not merely a particular thing, external in character; the value of such a thing is something inward and therefore distinct from its outward character, so that it is in no way impaired if what has been stipulated is not accomplished. What the servant of the state is to do, however, is as such a value in and as itself. Hence the wrong committed through its non-performance, or through positive injury to it . . . is an injury to the universal content itself . . . and so is a transgression or even a crime.[23]

For Hegel, thinking is no one thing or series of things in particular, at least in what appears in and as a result of thinking, just as it would later be for Heidegger. But unlike Heidegger, who expressly opposes thinking to the rational administration of the state, the thought of the bureaucrat, for Hegel, is marked by an inward rather than an outward consistency.[24] And it should be emphasized here that Hegel understands thinking as a matter of willingness. In this scenario, the particular only fails to be

reconciled with the universal character of the state—and regardless of the external form that any one thing might take—when the bureaucrat has become unwilling to think in a consistent way, and that consistency owes nothing to what is particular to the bureaucrat. It stems, instead, from his preparedness to think in *just this way*, the way of others similarly trained (however few they may be). The willed consistency of the bureaucrat's thinking, which mediates the relation of the particular to the universal, is also what Hegel believed to protect the government against "the other subjective aspect, namely the personal passions of the governed, whose private interests, etc., suffer injury when the universal is made to prevail against them."[25] For these reasons, it is not hard to imagine why the very idea of withdrawal appealed to Heidegger as a solution to political administration, insofar as he understands thinking to take place *only* if what we think ceaselessly moves and rejects all moorings, and especially as thought is identified in Hegel as that which does the work of social regulation and control.

And yet, as Claude Lefort began to demonstrate around the same time that Heidegger was preparing his lectures on thinking, bureaucracies thrive on the dispersion and fragmentation that fosters a unified authority. "*The more that activities are fragmented, departments are diversified, specialized and compartmentalized, structural levels are multiplied and authority is delegated at each level, the more the instances of co-ordination and supervision proliferate, by virtue of this very dispersion, and the more bureaucracy flourishes.*"[26] This is, it seems to me, what has come to pass. As bureaucracies flourish, they become increasingly fragmented, which means that their outward appearance might seem to us—at best—an uneven assemblage of tiny particulars that hang together in a nonbinding constellation. More likely, that constellation is bound; it is just that we cannot see the binding, nor will we look if we continue to consider ceaseless change—whether it goes by the name of the rhizome, becoming, event, and so on—as a necessarily emancipatory condition. The more that activity becomes fragmented, the more those fragments contribute to the centralization of an authority that will nevertheless not be seen in any of its constituent parts. This is what Hegel demonstrated when he distinguished the consistency of thought from what manifests externally, either for or from that thought. And it does so to protect the authority of the executive power and despite the fact that the structure ap-

pears rational since what binds top and bottom is something consistent and continuous.

Too often we think the opposite, namely, that logics of the rhizome, becoming, de-territorialization, the event, all work against the consolidation of authority, when in fact such occurrences just as often diversify and extend the centralization of an authority that remains unseen and unimaginable. This is something like the way that Deleuze and Guattari describe Gregor Samsa's transformation in *The Metamorphosis* in response to bureaucratic forms, though not without a subtle and important stipulation:

> The bureaucratic triangle forms itself progressively. First, the director who comes to menace and to demand; then the father who has resumed his work at the bank and who sleeps in his uniform, demonstrating the external power that he is still in submission to as if even at home he was "only at the beck and call of his superior" and finally, in a single moment, the intrusion of the three bureaucrat lodgers who penetrate the family itself, taking up its roles, sitting "where formerly Gregor and his father and mother had taken their meals." And as a correlate of all of this, the whole becoming-animal of Gregor, his becoming beetle, junebug, dungbeetle, cockroach, which traces an intense line of flight in relation to the familial triangle but especially in relation to the bureaucratic and commercial triangle.[27]

That is to say, if Gregor's father and by extension the director are symmetrical bureaucratic forms against which Gregor's animality takes shape, we would have to take seriously that Gregor's flight, which is also a transformation, is an escape from bureaucratic administration; escape remains, in conventional terms, the promise of freedom. But Deleuze and Guattari take care to note that "the problem is not that of being free but of finding a way out, or even a way in, another side, a hallway, an adjacency."[28] It seems to me that not only is it the case that the question does not concern freedom, but Gregor's flight, his transformation, also marks the shift in bureaucratic appearance as we began to discover it late in the twentieth century (and as Hegel imagined it in the early nineteenth century, albeit for different reasons), insofar as the rhizomatic movement of the bureaucrat is what appears and also what remains tethered to a centralized administration that we nevertheless cannot see. If Gregor's monstrosity is also an image of thinking, we have one more reason to understand how

thinking, which resembles the rhizomatic, cannot be easily severed from bureaucratic logics.

A particularly instructive and particularly recent example of the conjunction of withdrawal and quasi-rhizomatic bureaucratic logics is to be found, however unintentionally, in Catherine Malabou's *What Should We Do with Our Brain?* There, Malabou describes the work of the brain in terms of plasticity, which she opposes to flexibility. What Malabou rejects, in particular, is a model of the brain as a central command—the brain as a thinking machine that works in a manner not unlike the pyramidal or rational bureaucracies that I've just described. Her reasons for doing so are related to questions of labor and exploitation that lead her to favor plasticity over elasticity, which corresponds to the top-down and outdated model of the brain as central command. Thought is plastic, she says, insofar as our neuronal activity is "something that cannot return to its initial form after undergoing a deformation."[29] If thought is instead understood as elastic, then it may expand, but only to return to where it was before it moved. For Malabou, plasticity describes the brain's capacity for improvisation, creativity, and the aleatory—and most of all, non-recurrence. She argues, and in a way that weds Heidegger's conception of *Dasein* with his later appeals to thinking, that "the interaction of the brain with its surroundings instead acts as a commanding authority, whose unknown form and location disrupt the traditional geography of government. The functional plasticity of the brain deconstructs its function as the central organ and generates the image of a fluid process, somehow present everywhere and nowhere, which places the outside and the inside in contact by developing an internal principle of repair, and an external principle of adaptation and evolution."[30] In other words, the brain moves as we move and repairs itself as it breaks continually, which is something other than a return to the state in which it once consistently was. This is also a disruption, she says, of the "traditional geography of government." How so? Malabou writes, "To ask 'What should we do with our brain?' is above all to visualize the possibility of saying no to an afflicting economic, political, and mediatic culture that celebrates only the triumph of flexibility, blessing obedient individuals who have no greater merit than that of knowing how to bow their heads with a smile."[31] And yet, if thought is plastic, then, as an instance of the political, it could only ever constitute an outside that no longer exists—i.e., a rational bureaucratic administration that demands flexibility. Thinking, in other words, could only ever mirror

the logic of withdrawal that fosters the very consolidation of authority, just as Lefort proposed. In this case, this constitutive outside could only confirm what exists, and what exists resembles the disinformatic logics of bureaucracy.

For this reason, flexibility strikes me as a more apt metaphor for thought's relation to politics, and social relations more generally. On the one hand, Malabou opposes the notion on the idea that flexibility implies our willingness to do what we can, as workers, to combat the falling rate of profit. Even if this is the case, what cannot flex further typically snaps, and thus we start again, differently. And while "flexibility" indicates a form of alienation that is our capacity to do more as workers, it just as easily suggests a capacity for thinking. One need only recall Henri Bergson's claim that our laughter is a corrective to what has become automated or mechanical in us, even if simply by habit. The corrective, for Bergson, demands elasticity, which he perceives to be a socially responsive gesture: "Society will therefore be suspicious of all *inelasticity* of character, of mind and even of body, because it is the possible sign of a slumbering activity as well as of an activity with separatist tendencies, that inclines to swerve from the common centre round which society gravitates: in short, because it is a sign of eccentricity."[32] The automatism installed by habit has to be understood as eccentric because it is the inflexibility in perception and awareness that leaves one unresponsive to whatever exceeds or defies this particular regime of seeing. Even more promising, in my estimation, would be to consider how a notion of flexibility, or elasticity, also indicates a capacity to stay with something that does not yet work but could, which is what any useful conception of the political ought to aspire to. That is, one might stay with something as possible, but most often as a way of creating a different experience, a different ordering of aspects that strike us not only as our own but also as better. How would we sustain or even implement an order of the political that, by definition, has no relation to what it was before? Staying with what works does not mean doing the same thing one has always done in a dogmatic way. It means accepting a notion of continuity that depends on the collective will of a given hegemonic order to discover ways of sustaining what we once believed in to the extent that a new order of the social was instituted. In this sense, we simply have to remain attached and find different ways to express the legitimacy or illegitimacy of those attachments to whatever contingent hegemonic articulation of the social we currently believe in. If what we have

instituted fails as an order of the social, and as the result of an involuntary act, then we may feel regret, which will simply give us a way of thinking about a contingent social formation on the basis of what has now passed, knowing (as we cannot now help but do) that what we need now will also be slightly different than what we had before. This is, in my view, what it means to be politically serious—that we can find a way of honoring our attachments by finding different reasons and different ways of expressing and renewing what we want to remain the same.

Malabou's notion of plasticity, which we might also regard as the succession of unrelated automatisms, leaves no trace of what came before it, which I take to be less a problem of history, and notions of historical continuity, than an unhelpful conception of space. In this sense, the problem in Malabou's conception is not so different from the one that Norval identifies in Mouffe's conception of agonism, insofar as the production of adversaries instead of enemies involves not an aspect shift but a radical spatial break between opposed parties. That is, preceding the conceptual distinction of enemy and adversary is a spatial logic that would resemble something like a series of incommunicable, wholly distinct totalities. In Malabou's theory of the brain, what heals when broken are not two pieces that were once one. Rather, what heals is the edge of whatever remains after the break and is sealed off without a trace, in the work of healing, from what it was once attached to. The new cannot be renewed, submitted to aspect change; the new can only be what was severed and what remains outside of any relation whatsoever. In short, Malabou's image of the brain is an image of revolution, the success of which depends as much on forgetting as it does on total rupture. And it would be hard to imagine how something like a revolution could be sustained on the basis of forgetting and an opposition to relationality. For this reason, it is also important to emphasize that this deconstructive vision of the brain's function fails as deconstruction, precisely because it wants to locate the rhizomatic movement of thought as an essential feature of the human brain, hence, the conceptual foreclosure of our capacity to imagine or constitute an outside. If we admit that much, then what we have is less a revolutionary conception of cognition than a normative statement about how we think, in a hardwired way, which means that it would also be impossible to count the bureaucrat out as someone capable of thinking. How, if we follow Malabou's image of the brain, could we imagine the bureaucrat to be otherwise than *we* are? Namely, as discontinuous thinkers whose

discontinuity—the presumptive source of our capacity for autonomy—is automated by the plasticity of the brain that we nevertheless all have. Whether the discontinuity of thought is tied to a mechanized conception of what it cannot cognitively help but do, or else it is understood as the very manner in which rational authority is avoided or even undone, we are faced with comparable models of withdrawal as *the basis of thought*. However, if comparable, the two cannot be identical. If two things are comparable, they simply share an aspect or aspects and have, as such, a way to remain together long enough so that we might achieve for ourselves and acknowledge in the other our respective standing. If we feign agreement, in the instances where genuine agreement cannot be reached, the best and also the worst that can happen to us is that we would come to regret it. We might stand accused of hypocrisy, which is simply, or at least potentially, another way of describing thinking.

HYPOCRISY AND REGRET

It would not be difficult to imagine a situation in which my suggestion that we take the bureaucrat seriously as someone capable of thinking might open me to the charge of hypocrisy, especially if I have been heard, let's say, to complain about an administrator or an administration, or to have written about the importance of monstration as a revolutionary act in the work of a filmmaker long thought to be interested only in transcendence. Or else, one might think my goal here is to submit the continental tradition, which I also greatly value, to a form of moral condemnation, to append to it the charge of hypocrisy, insofar as I can show that the logics of bureaucratic dissimulation are mimicked or anticipated by continental descriptions of the work of thinking. After all, what else could it mean to accept what I also intend to reject? The hypocrisy would be twofold—that which I demonstrate in others and then expose in myself as a condition of my immersion in those texts. I have no interest in making this case precisely because the charge of hypocrisy *is* relevant, just not as a moral charge or condemnation, not even as something unfortunate, if also benign. Rather, I want to show, by way of bringing things to a point, that hypocrisy and regret are at times importantly allied as expressions of thoughtfulness.

A better conception of hypocrisy itself will allow us to see why there is nothing much to lose in remaining in at least putative agreement with an

ill-intentioned bureaucrat or an altruistic advisor—that we acknowledge his capacity for thinking so that he might begin to acknowledge our own. Hypocrisy is, of course, a moral charge, one we readily level against those who profess first principles while doing something that would be in obvious defiance of that commitment. However, we might be better served by recognizing a usage of the term that may very well complicate, if not eliminate altogether, the moral claim.[33] "Hypocrisy" is derived from the Greek word *hypokrisis*, the combination of *hypo*, or "under," and *krinein*, "to sift or decide."[34] In this sense, we can, most basically—and before any moral determination—define hypocrisy as a sifting from under, as an act of featuring or merely regarding one thing while sorting a new relation to what we feature or regard from under. Interestingly, *hypokrisis* also suggests, in its early Greek usage, "acting on the stage, pretense." It is for this reason, surely, that hypocrisy gets caught up with morality—or, better to say, moralism—insofar as the actor would seem to be the embodiment of saying or doing something that is in opposition or at least is not identical to what one actually thinks or believes. To be an actor is to become and display something or someone who one nevertheless is not. The actor is, in this way, regularly subject to doubts about his or her "proper" or real self. There are, to be sure, instances when the charge of hypocrisy is meant—especially in the realm of real politics—to uncover a deception, such as when one is shown to have signed a public statement in favor of a strike in order to conceal more readily the work of being a scab, or of owning property while professing to be a Marxist and demanding the latter's truth be countenanced by every other rather than taking on more directly the complications of our desires and sensibilities *as* complications. It is just that such instances, in which what is shown and what is thought or done, cannot be moralized as responses to any structured opposition to appearance and belief, since that relation is just as easily described as one between appearance and thought, particularly when thought is regarded as a sifting from under. To put things more simply, it may just be that we are better served to call such willful instances of dissimulation lying, since the divide between appearance and reality here is intended and is not, in that way, the effect of a changing mind. A lie might give way to regret—and thus pass through hypocrisy along the way—but in lying the liar, at least initially, intends to carry on believing what he has only ever believed in the first place. What the liar wants is to meet the demand of acceptance at the level of appearance while thinking nothing acceptable.

But in a more flexible conception of hypocrisy, as distinguished from lying, we can say that if we are sifting from under while showing something else, it may simply be the case that we are not hiding or dissimulating but are engaged in an ordinary experience of thoughtfulness. It is not simply that we are changing our mind but that mindfulness requires shifting, if not change. Curiously, in *The Life of the Mind*, Arendt speaks of the activity of thinking and the threat of hypocrisy in terms that just as easily include the work of fictional performance, but only insofar as the distinction between fiction and non-fiction becomes importantly difficult to sustain. Of the difference between self-display and self-presentation, for instance, Arendt writes,

> Since appearances always present themselves in the guise of seeming, pretense and willful deception on the part of the performer, error and illusion on the part of the spectator are, inevitably, among the inherent potentialities. Self-presentation is distinguished from self-display by the active and conscious choice of the image shown; self-display has no choice but to show whatever properties a living being possesses. Self-presentation would not be possible without a degree of self-awareness—a capability inherent in the reflexive character of mental activities and clearly transcending mere consciousness, which we probably share with higher animals. Only self-presentation is open to hypocrisy and pretense, properly speaking, and the only way to tell pretense and make-believe from reality and truth is the former's failure to endure and remain consistent.[35]

What Arendt is suggesting here is that we are all, at various points, an image for others.[36] We become so, most unassumingly, by virtue of volitionless acts of self-display, or what shows of us, what remains a feature of our physicality, in an ongoing, unintentional way. Nothing prevents anyone from reading what one encounters in the confrontation with my self-display in this or that way, in ways that defy what I think I am showing; anyone is free to project onto me, even in my most guileless moment, ideas and associations drawn from sources other than the one that I also now am for some other. But what Arendt makes clear, here, is that we also regularly present ourselves in a particular way, such that pretense or hypocrisy might show at the very moment when what we have been presenting in one way, continuously, lapses. That is, I have been trying to present myself as *x*, so much so that it will be understood as an instance

of self-display—or what I cannot help but show as the me that never changes—when I suddenly lapse and show *y* instead.

However, just as soon as Arendt makes the distinction and suggests that the charge of pretense or hypocrisy may be what emerges in the distinction that one might begin to detect between self-presentation and self-display, she complicates the very notion of hypocrisy by indicating how difficult the distinction can be to make in the first place. "To uncover the 'true' identity of an animal behind its adaptive temporary color is not unlike the unmasking of the hypocrite. But what then appears under a deceptive surface is not an inside self, an authentic appearance, changeless and reliable in its thereness. The uncovering destroys a deception; it does not discover anything authentically appearing. An 'inside self,' if it exists at all, never appears to either the inner or outward sense, since none of the inner data possess stable, relatively permanent features which, being recognizable and identifiable, characterize individual appearance."[37] If the "inside self" possesses no permanent features, it is because what counts as inside can only be derived by what we also describe as outside. If I am an object for others, every other is also a potential object for me. Put differently, when I contemplate what appears to me, especially if what appears is something I do not yet recognize, I draw on memories of things that are now summoned by what I see but do not yet understand. I begin to project onto an object the characteristics of other objects. And that implies, in part, that as I look at one thing, I may withdraw as I began to feature other things from other places for myself. It is, most likely, at this very moment that self-presentation and self-display cease to coincide, not because I am hiding or dissimulating but because I am thinking; I am attempting to form a visual grammar for what now appears before me. If what I find myself thinking of—at the very moment of withdrawal from appearance—is derived, at least in part, from the impression or trace of what I once encountered as the outside of and to myself, then my capacity to think is also what collapses a distinction between inside and outside, since what I think with is a phenomenal trace, or an object displaced. A condition of remaining responsive to the world, of reckoning with what we see but do not comprehend at once, is that self-display and self-presentation—what we actually show and what we intend to show continuously—become, for however long, distinct. To be charged with hypocrisy, in such moments, is merely to have been caught in an act of thinking. And if thought and appearance maintain some distance, we

will have more reason, still, to live with the awful similarity that pertains between emancipated conceptions of thinking as withdrawal and bureaucratic dissimulation. In the end, that relation shares something important with the difficulty of deciding whether an instance of hypocrisy is to be understood as an expression of thinking or an intended deception, the covering over of contradiction. We may simply need to make a judgment about which is a deception and which is an instance of thinking, of the mind changing by virtue of what we revisit in thought. In this way, we find the continuity of our being in the act of re-visitation, since what we feature for ourselves in such moments is the continuity of phenomena as constant displacement, the comparative dimension of which leads to an aspect shift as the work and world of thought. It is the distance thought keeps from what it thinks about. Or as Arendt puts it, "First, thinking is always out of order, interrupts all ordinary activities and is interrupted by them."[38]

In making a judgment about hypocrisy, I can easily be wrong, especially since being wrong, as Davide Panagia rightly contends, is an ontological problem, not an epistemological one.[39] Put simply, what is wrong will change as we change; what changes stems from thinking not from knowledge or from first principles. This is what makes regret so important. In the first chapter, I defined regret as a response that we have to the outward appearance of things and as the moment in which we recognize that what has passed before us was a contingent rather than a necessary phenomenon. The point of the distinction was twofold: first, to indicate that nonvoluntary relations are much rarer than we suppose, and second, that what our feeling of regret shows us is that the relation we maintained with what has now passed was, in fact, an involuntary one—a relation that has some bearing on the use or neglect of our will. Regret gives us not a second chance of seeing the same thing but a heightened awareness of the relative scarcity of nonvoluntary relations, which should prepare us for the contingency of whatever else arrives and should prevent us in turn from expecting that whatever does arrive will look exactly like what passed, or how we had imagined what it was that passed. However, if regret is implicated in our relation to appearance, then it also, perhaps most obviously, has an inward aspect; that is to say, it is also an experience that can be described as withdrawal.

When we experience regret, we feature for ourselves an image of what has passed. The experience of regret is an occasion for the projection of a

mental image of something or some relation between people and things that we remember, but it is not only that. When picturing for ourselves what has passed we are also thinking of something else at once. We picture the same thing in different ways at the same time, even if the point of doing so is to arrive at a mental arrangement of the aspects that will take on more stability than the arrangement of aspects in the image that initially deceived me. If the mental image of what has passed and that comes of regret can be said to be more stable, it is also the case that it exists in a state of perpetual superimposition, at least insofar as we invoke that image in any experience of regret. And if the images that we keep suspended in mental superimposition are derived from the phenomenal world, then the "inward" dimension of regret cannot, in the end, be told apart from its supposedly "outward" dimension, insofar as what we reflect on and project for ourselves is as importantly "outside" as it is "inside."

In the end, regret is not so easy to distinguish from the work of thinking. Regret allows us to redress a wrong, which is nothing more than a confusion about appearance, or the hasty assumption that self-presentation and self-display come to the same point, or that the hypocrisy I noted is not, in fact, an instance of thinking but the appearance that is meant to be a covering over. But only if I am capable of thinking, and of regarding the bureaucrat as having the same capacity, do I have the chance not only to redress a wrong but also to see that how I think, as opposed to what I think, is what we have in common. Regret allows for agreement, or mutuality, where there once had only been discord. I can try again in a different field of experience with the same person or people. Most importantly, perhaps, agreement comes neither from conversion nor a belief that finds its constituency in time, that is, after the fact. Rather, regret is the altogether something else. It is the unheralded expanse of what can, at any time, go wrong, and thus go a different way. The experience of regret is what allows us to go wrong without redrawing a line between friend and enemy, to the extent that whoever departs—having been identified as an enemy—remains an enemy, and whatever I have now, I will have forever, once and again.

Afterthoughts

If regret and hypocrisy come to indicate the affective registration of thinking itself—as I have suggested that they ought to, at least insofar as one relates to the other—then what's left for politics?

The question appears reasonable, since we so often assume that politics depends, at the very least, on the rhetorical force of conviction, in which case we know what we say or think and why we do what we do. Regret, conceived as it is here, might strike us as small change in the work of real politics, especially since we are accustomed to thinking of regret strictly in terms of failure, and then as a near synonym for nostalgia, at least when nostalgia is understood in its more colloquial expressions as a tenacious longing for something that has passed to the extent that we fail to properly appreciate what is before us.[1] I hope that I have indicated no such thing myself. The answer to the question, if there is just one question, might simply be: I don't know. But in saying so, I am not suggesting that we do nothing or expect nothing better. I simply suggest that we cease making appeals to the possible, which is nothing more than a false ground of knowledge, the proven path of what cannot, in any case, be given as proof. It may be that proof is only ever, in phenomenological terms, *given*, as the second chapter should indicate. In this sense, I am in sympathy with Jean-Luc Nancy's response to Lenin's question—what is to be done?—especially as it continues, in a nearly unabated fashion, to haunt political theorists, and precisely as an invocation of the possible. The question, in Nancy's formulation, promises something that it can never deliver: a guarantee. Writing a year after a series of general strikes

in France in 1995, many of which immobilized the country in different ways and at different times, Nancy reminds us that "invention is always without a model and without a warranty. But indeed that means facing up to turmoil, anxiety, even disarray. When certainties come apart, there too gathers the strength that no certainty can match."[2] My theory of regret is nothing if not a way of understanding how turmoil, anxiety, and disarray are not only devastating—as such experiences very often are—but also productive of thought itself, which rarely happens, when it happens, with immediate clarity, ease, and indications of self-assurance. Only dogma can provide that quickly, and dogma is something other than thinking.

This is also why hypocrisy comes to matter as a way of understanding both regret and the work of thinking itself, for a number of reasons. When we attempt to forestall regret, when we picture for ourselves what we might do, so as to go unnoticed in error—and ideally, never to err—we are trying to avoid the appearance of hypocrisy. That is to say, if we believe that we must be consistent in the presentation of ourselves in relation to a principle or series of principles—which is what binds religious conviction to political conviction in every case—then our doubts will always be put to bad use. And yet, from this perspective, the only way to remain free of hypocrisy is to refuse change, which means that we will also have to refuse thought: what we show others, we will take responsibility for as something identical to what we feature to and for ourselves. What we feature to and for ourselves, and also for others, is not only the same thing in such cases—knowing that by "same" we do not mean identical cases so much as instances of grammatical agreement—but is merely the sedimentation of a concept understood as the stable ground of all belief. Or as Linda Zerilli has argued, "The notion that political claims are either grounded (and therefore not contestable) or ungrounded (and therefore not persuasive) occludes a third possibility: rather than knowledge claims that must be redeemed as true or false by means of a logical or cognitive (determinant) judgment, political claims are based on contingently formed public opinions that call for our (reflective) judgment *without the mediation of a concept*."[3] Hypocrisy gives name to both what remains as an expression of a supposedly grounded moral or political claim and, at the same time, the drift away from a claim that has worked for so long and now seems unworthy of the complications introduced. Hypocrisy names the presence of the original concept as it has both persisted and as it no longer applies, as well as whatever registers in the drift away, or the sift-

ing from under—whatever is given to judgment without the mediation of a concept. It is "the strength," to return to Nancy, "that no certainty can match." It is also an experience that requires, or at least must always risk, regret.

This is why I have featured superimposition, in the final chapter, as an important trope for understanding the work of thought in a regretful state, and as the figuration of hypocrisy itself, insofar as it allows us, as a pictorial form that is isometric with thinking, to see the stated ground of conviction accompanied by its impossibility. I come to this claim just over one hundred years after Lois Weber, a pioneer of early cinema in the silent era. In 1915, Weber released her film *Hypocrites*, in which the figure of "Naked Truth," performed by Margaret Edwards, appears as a naked woman seen only in the film in and as superimposition, as she leads a pastor through a series of places and institutions in order to reveal the hypocrisy of first principles that animates each experience in a given institution, whether in church, politics, marriage, or some other. As a superimpository figure, Naked Truth is never in just one place or another. She can be seen and also be seen through (figure conc.1). Technically speaking, in Weber's figuration of Naked Truth are two images from two different places at two different times seen at once, one atop the other. The only time that Naked Truth appears in one image, and as one image—that is, not in superimposition—is when she takes the pastor back in time to witness a scene in which a medieval monk erects a statue of Naked Truth only to provoke the violence of the people. Conventional wisdom regards the attack on the statue as a moralistic attack on nudity, on the indiscreet presentation of the female body. It strikes me instead as an important and familiar political act of iconoclasm that often follows and announces, ceremonially, the end of any dictatorship, or the reign of first principles.

Following this scene of iconoclasm, Naked Truth takes the pastor back to the present, to a series of scenes of hypocrisy. In the first, she takes him to a political rally in which we see a politician standing on a stage and before a sign that reads, "MY PLATFORM IS HONESTY." The priest and Naked Truth join the politician on stage (and we continue to see Naked Truth, and also to *see through* Naked Truth), at which point she holds up a mirror to the politician (figure conc.2). When she does so, the entirety of the frame begins to blur, and no one has the same figural definition they had seconds before, save for Naked Truth, who remains in superimposition (figure conc.3). The screen goes black for a moment when Naked

Conc.1

Truth's mirror appears in the center of the frame and shows us, in the oval that appears in an otherwise black frame, a scene of the politician in an entirely different place and time, collecting bribes from his constituents (figure conc.4). The frame goes dark and we return to the original blurred frame, in which Naked Truth continues to appear, amid the blurred figures, in the full clarity of superimposition. She can be seen through, but the layers themselves remain distinct, while the form of everyone else become significantly less distinct. As the scene of the political rally comes back into focus, the priest walks off the stage with his head down (figure conc.5). He has learned something. He looks regretful.[4]

It would, however, be too simple to read this scene as a clear instance of moral unveiling, of revelation. What is exposed, to return to Zerilli's formulation, is the absence of ground in what is professed *as* ground, in what is expressed as first principle: "MY PLATFORM IS HONESTY." The point is not simply that Naked Truth (and Lois Weber) shows the politician to be corrupt where instead he features his virtue. More important is that Naked Truth has taught something to the pastor—a man beholden to first principles (and unsuccessfully, since he is also shown to bore his parishioners)—namely, how to think, which means seeing something before you and also something else at once. That is, she is showing him how to think in two times at once—how, in Arendt's terms, to be in two

Conc.2

Conc.3

Conc.4

Conc.5

places at once. Naked Truth is the visual figuration of what it means to sift from under. The principle remains on view, and so do alternative ways of thinking about or against that principle. We are all hypocrites, at some point. But what relieves us of the dogmatism in any instance of hypocrisy is our capacity for regret. If I insist on always saying one thing in the same way while doing something else in the same way, then I should be easily found out and decided against—in any venue—on the basis of my inability to think, which is also my unwillingness to try and make sense of why someone would look at the same thing in a different way than I do.

The fear of hypocrisy, unfortunately, tends to compel us to fortify our positions, to maintain what we show to others in the same way while doing something else in the same way. For this reason alone, regret—and

all that follows from it—gathers its political strength for being a way in which we can acknowledge our inflexibility and thereby create the conditions under which we can begin a conversation with someone or some others who have—or so we have thought—values entirely opposed to ours. It could be that in time the conversation goes badly and should not continue. But in that case, I can merely regret my effort and try something else. This is why the bureaucrat has been an important figure here, as well as the mentor, whom we typically take to be altruistic to the core. I see them both—the bureaucrat and the mentor—as relatable but not identical figures. For one, we often think of bureaucrats as hypocrites, just like the politician in Weber's film, who proclaims his categorical belief in honesty while taking bribes from his constituents. But if I assume this to be true of every bureaucrat, then I am left with two options. I can either leave the institution in which I find myself ensnarled—and every other institution thereafter—or else carry on raging in a state of hopeless melancholy against an enemy who perceives my limits just as clearly as I believe I perceive his. Both options suppose a belief in revolution as always the first step, in absolute breaks predicated on the absence of complete agreement, and on the assumption that there can never be agreement at any point further.

Sometimes, as we know, revolutions are necessary, but perhaps not as often as we imagine. Just as often, if not more so, the clean break is not so clean. How else to explain, for example, the institution of the first five-year plan with the beginning of the Soviet Union, a rapprochement with capitalism that seems in retrospect (and to many at the time) to have announced something less than a compromise: namely, that capitalism and socialism are not necessarily incompatible as modes of accumulation, if they differ, in principle, as modes of dissemination and distribution. I am always struck by the talk of five-year plans in the North American academy, for instance—by the language of a compromise that really never was one and that now rears its head in the West in the faculty meetings of liberal North American universities. We would do better to try and figure out what we have in common, not just what separates us, and separates us entirely. That is, if we are going to think about institutions comparatively, then we will have to consider something more than our differences, even when we are attempting to regard the differences as something to be honored, recognized as points of distinction. The differences will be what constitute the very act of comparison, since it could not happen if a rela-

tion of identity is what we pursue. The point is not to identify what is the same and then eliminate one or even both terms of any relation, but to do the work of understanding what we hold in common. "Common" is what we can accept as related, not what is related in principle or else in essence.

For this reason my theory of regret supposes a belief in institutions, and an attendant belief that they can be renegotiated from within. The experience of autonomy matters a great deal, of course. It is just that autonomy itself—at least in the realm of politics—cannot exist as a first principle, nor can it be known or experienced in a categorically distinct way. No institution can be satisfying in every way, which is something that we should be able to see, first, in what we describe as our own sensibility.

In this respect, I have in mind a late passage in *Roland Barthes by Roland Barthes*, entitled *Terre promise*, in which Barthes reflects, in the third person, on his own regrets: "He regretted not being able to embrace all avant-gardes at once, he regretted being limited, too conventional, etc.; and his regret could be illuminated by no sure analysis: just what was it he was resisting? What was he rejecting (or even more superficially: what was he *sulking over*) in one place or another? A style? An arrogance? A violence? An imbecility?"[5] What Barthes acknowledges in himself, presumably, is what he also has gotten over, since Barthes—much like the narrator of *The Postman Always Rings Twice*—sees something else than what "he" once saw. If "he" regretted not being able to embrace every instance of avant-garde art, Barthes—the one who writes of an earlier "he"—seems to have recognized that it would be foolish to suppose that every instance of avant-garde art is worth supporting, in principle, and that every instance could or should be known, moreover. If regret can be illumined by no sure analysis, it is because regret supposes no surety, on the one hand, and must reject analysis itself, on the other, at least when analysis proceeds on the basis of possibility. What comes forward in Barthes's reflection on regret, here, is what regret should actually oppose and also mitigate against: a style (as if there were just one, or even just one in every one), an arrogance (why should I talk to *him*?), a violence (which is wrapped up with an analysis that works as much as one that fails—first when we accept advice, and second when we reject it), and an imbecility (what I assume of the other who prefers something other than what I do). What Roland Barthes seems to do, here, is to regret the way that he had been thinking of regret—namely, as a worry about hypocrisy. Self-protection—or the careful maintenance of what I feature for others

and also to myself in the same way, while thinking about something else, also always in the same way—opposes thinking, which registers in this passage from Barthes as an instance of vulnerability rather than weakness. The vulnerability that follows the acknowledgment of regret is an important political emotion precisely for the way in which it reopens us to a world greater than the one we have only ever made and maintained for ourselves.

NOTES

INTRODUCTION

1 Adolf Eichmann, "Eichmann's Own Story: 'To Sum It All Up, I Regret Nothing,'" *Life Magazine*, December 5, 1960, 161. The emphasis is mine.
2 Hannah Arendt, *Eichmann in Jerusalem: A Report on the Banality of Evil* (New York: Penguin, 1977), 22.
3 Richard Rorty, "Ethics without Principles," chap. 4 in *Philosophy and Social Hope* (London: Penguin, 1999), 80.
4 Eichmann, "Eichmann's Own Story," 158.
5 Eichmann, "Eichmann's Own Story," 150.
6 Janet Landman, *Regret: The Persistence of the Possible* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993), 257.
7 For a general survey and analysis of such claims, see Thomas Hurka, "Monism, Pluralism, and Rational Regret," *Ethics* 106 (April 1996): 555–575.
8 Hurka, "Monism, Pluralism, and Rational Regret," 560.
9 Hurka, "Monism, Pluralism, and Rational Regret," 559.
10 Rorty, "Ethics without Principles," 79.
11 Rorty, "Ethics without Principles," 79.
12 Hannah Arendt, *Eichmann in Jerusalem*, 149.
13 Hannah Arendt, "Thinking and Moral Considerations," in *Responsibility and Judgment*, ed. Jerome Kohn (New York: Schocken, 2003), 180.
14 Arendt, "Thinking and Moral Considerations," 163.
15 Arendt, "Thinking and Moral Considerations," 188.
16 Sigmund Freud, "Mourning and Melancholia," in *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, vol. 14, trans. and ed. James Strachey (London: Hogarth, 1994), 245.
17 Freud, "Mourning and Melancholia," 245.
18 Eugenie Brinkema, *The Forms of the Affects* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2014), 58.
19 Brinkema, *The Forms of the Affects*, 66.

20 Brinkema, *The Forms of the Affects*, 67.
21 Freud, "Mourning and Melancholia," 243.
22 Jacques Rancière, "Ten Theses on Politics," in *Contemporary Marxist Theory: A Reader*, ed. Andrew Pendakis, Jeff Diamanti, Nicholas Brown, and Imre Szeman (New York: Bloomsbury Academic, 2014), 556.
23 David Harvey, *The Enigma of Capital: And the Crises of Capitalism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), 227.
24 Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, "Address to the Communist League," in Karl Marx, *Selected Writings*, ed. David McLellan (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1977), 285.
25 Repeated, for instance, as the title of a book by Leon Trotsky, *Permanent Revolution & Results and Prospects* (Seattle: Red Letter Press, 2010).
26 See, for instance, Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe, *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy: Towards a Radical Democratic Politics* (New York: Verso, 2014); Ernesto Laclau, *On Populist Reason* (New York: Verso, 2007); and Ernesto Laclau, "Why Do Empty Signifiers Matter to Politics?," chap. 3 in *Emancipation(s)* (New York: Verso, 2007).
27 Jean-Luc Nancy, "The Inoperative Community," in *The Inoperative Community*, ed. Peter Connor (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1991).
28 Gilles Tremlett, "The Podemos Revolution: How a Small Group of Radical Academics Changed European Politics," *The Guardian*, March 31, 2015, http://www.theguardian.com/world/2015/mar/31/podemos-revolution-radical-academics-changed-european-politics.
29 Søren Kierkegaard, *Either/Or*, ed. and trans. Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1987), 38–39.
30 Kierkegaard, *Either/Or*, 40.
31 Jacques Derrida, *Archive Fever: A Freudian Impression*, trans. Eric Prenowitz (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998), 7.
32 Derrida, *Archive Fever*.
33 Corrado Roversi, "Conceptualizing Institutions," *Phenomenology and the Cognitive Sciences* 13, no. 1 (2014): 201.
34 I owe this point to Meghan Sutherland.
35 Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe, "Post-Marxism without Apologies," *New Left Review* 166 (November/December 1987): 82.
36 Laclau and Mouffe, "Post-Marxism without Apologies," 82–83.
37 Ben Kafka, *The Demon of Writing: Powers and Failures of Paperwork* (New York: Zone Books, 2012).
38 Kafka, *Demon of Writing*, 77.
39 Kafka, *Demon of Writing*, 111.
40 Kafka, *Demon of Writing*, 85.
41 David Graeber, *The Utopia of Rules: On Technology, Stupidity, and the Secret Joys of Bureaucracy* (Brooklyn: Melville House, 2015), 11.
42 Graeber, *Utopia of Rules*, 17.

43 Meghan Sutherland, "The Aporetic Apparatus," *World Picture* 12 (winter 2017), http://worldpicturejournal.com/WP_12/Sutherland.html.

44 Sutherland, "Aporetic Apparatus."

45 Thanks to Eugenie Brinkema for reminding me of this odd custom.

CHAPTER ONE: WHAT IS REGRET?

1 Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, 2nd ed., trans. Terence Irwin (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1999), 18.

2 Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*.

3 Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*.

4 Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, 25.

5 The solution to virtuosity itself, insofar as virtuosity can only ever remain within the limits of a medium or a technical form, is what Alexander García Düttmann has described as "aesthetic seriousness," which occurs at the moment in which intention breaks off at the limits of possibility. See Alexander García Düttmann, *Visconti: Insights into Flesh and Blood* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2009).

6 Quoted in Susan Saulny, "Woman Claims Affair with Cain, and He Denies It," *New York Times*, November 29, 2011, A19.

7 Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, 26.

8 Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*,27.

9 I am, of course, aware of the many problems that have arisen in conceptions of "the will." And yet, as I hope remains at least consistently implicit throughout this book, I'm not especially convinced that we can produce political change, or even sustain a political order that we continue to favor, without a notion of the will in place. In this respect, I am in complete agreement with a very important distinction that Peter Hallward has made, with respect to Fanon, between political *will* and political *compulsion*. Or as he puts it, "A consistent voluntarism requires, first, that political will be considered as a matter of volition or *will*, rather than compulsion, coercion, or 'instinct.' Voluntary action is a matter of free deliberation and prescription. Political will is thought through: it subsumes a 'spontaneous' enthusiasm or rebellion in an organized mobilization or a disciplined campaign."

Hallward's concern to emphasize thoughtfulness and reflection as a primary feature of political will is precisely where regret figures into any use of the will, in my own account. See Peter Hallward, "Fanon and Political Will," *Cosmos and History: The Journal of Natural and Social Philosophy* 7, no. 1 (2011): 107.

10 Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, 32.

11 I should point out that my conception of an aspect, here and elsewhere in the book, is of an aggregate variety. That is to say, in Wittgenstein's terms, if we agree on an aspect then we are either seeing *as* duck or seeing *as* rabbit—we are seeing parts that can be read differently but are now being read—and more or

less completely—in one particular way. I make this point in contradistinction to Davide Panagia's rather compelling theory of aspects, which he offers in "A Theory of Aspects: Media Participation and Political Theory" (and elsewhere in his work), as disaggregate and thus free of any criteria of judgment that can be epistemically justified. For Panagia, the disaggregate aspect is something more like the binding together of partialities that derive their commensurability strictly on the basis of an aesthetic appeal, or what he calls a "partaking," and never on the basis of verifiability. As he puts it, "This means that there are no rules in and by which aspects must be related to one another, that the fact of relation between aspects, and the assemblies of aspects that emerge, don't require the identification and/or sharing of common features. Instead, it involves processes of assemblage, relation, and association undetermined by necessity" (541).

I share Panagia's belief that the aspect is never beholden to knowledge or understanding, to epistemic verifiability. It is just that my project here, as I stated in the introduction, has a more institutional dimension, in which case regret is what allows for aspect dawning, which presumes—at least in my usage of it here—a movement from one thing to something else, but less as an assemblage, as it exists in Panagia's work, than as replacement—the options of which are derived, largely, from the capaciousness of a particular institutional framework. However, as I will argue just ahead, the sharing of an aspect does not necessarily indicate agreement or anything like partisanship. See Davide Panagia, "A Theory of Aspects: Media Participation and Political Theory," *New Literary History* 45 (2014): 527–548. See also Davide Panagia, *The Political Life of Sensation* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2010).

12 Bishnupriya Ghosh, "Governing by Wrong," *World Picture* 6 (winter 2011), http://worldpicturejournal.com/WP_6/Ghosh.html.

13 I also owe it, as a staple of my own theoretical vocabulary, to the late Betty Sutherland Philler, who used it in precisely this way.

14 It is important to remember, as well, that there are benign forms of such instances of bureaucratic "transparency." If one is in a large institution, it may be the case that one simply needs to be taught a concept or rule of the institution that almost no one but this particular administrator understands.

15 John Searle, *Making the Social World: The Structure of Human Civilization* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), 62. The emphasis is Searle's.

16 Searle, *Making the Social World*, 105–106.

17 For a similar and more sympathetic account of institutional constraints—and in a very different context—see Andrew Goffey's edifying account of Félix Guattari's emancipatory conception of institutions. Andrew Goffey, "Guattari and Transversality: Institutions, Analysis, and Experimentation," *Radical Philosophy* 195 (January/February 2016): 38–47.

18 David Graeber, *The Utopia of Rules: On Technology, Stupidity, and the Secret Joys of Bureaucracy* (Brooklyn: Melville House, 2015), 48.

19 Graeber, *Utopia of Rules*, 57.

20 And to be clear, I am not proposing that this is what Graeber favors—far from it. I am merely concerned to indicate a different way of reading his diagnosis of structural and therefore institutional violence.

21 Amelie Rorty, "Akratic Believers," *American Philosophical Quarterly* 20, no. 2 (April 1983): 175.

22 Rorty, "Akratic Believers," 176.

23 Rorty, "Akratic Believers," 177.

24 Rorty, "Akratic Believers," 183.

25 Alexander García Düttmann, "Euphemism, the University, and Disobedience," *Radical Philosophy* 169 (September/October 2011): 45.

26 García Düttmann, "Euphemism," 46.

27 García Düttmann, "Euphemism," 44.

28 García Düttmann, "Euphemism," 43.

29 Richard Holton, "Intention and Weakness of Will," *Journal of Philosophy* 96, no. 5 (May 1999): 241.

30 Quoted in Holton, "Intention and Weakness of Will," 258.

31 Holton, "Intention and Weakness of Will."

32 Peter Sloterdijk, *Rage and Time*, trans. Mario Wenning (New York: Columbia University Press, 2010), 61.

33 Walter Benjamin, "Some Reflections on Kafka," in *Illuminations*, ed. Hannah Arendt (New York: Harcourt, Brace and World, 1968), 141.

34 Walter Benjamin, "Franz Kafka," in Arendt, *Illuminations*, 115.

35 Franz Kafka, *The Trial*, trans. Breon Mitchell (New York: Schocken, 1998), 64.

36 Kafka, *The Trial*, 58.

37 Kafka, *The Trial*, 39.

38 Kafka, *The Trial*, 41.

CHAPTER TWO: IMPOSSIBLE ADVICE

1 I am not concerned to develop this claim here, since my concern in this chapter is with a general theory of advice rather than an analysis of genre or style, but it would be worth considering the extent to which any instance of film noir tends to develop and display a structure of regret. How many of these films feature voice-over narrators that take us back through events that have already occurred expressly to show where the wrong decision was made on the basis of a failure of the will? In *Fatalism in American Film Noir: Some Cinematic Philosophy* (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2013), Robert Pippin considers a related question about the way in which films noir often stage misconceptions of reflective models of agency. Garnett's *Postman* certainly meets all of the criteria that Pippin convincingly identifies in his theory of fatalism. The difference that regret introduces, potentially, has to do with the way that we, as spectators, reflect on the flashback itself as a mode of regret that the characters nevertheless ignore, at least as a potential mode of emancipation.

2 Stanley Cavell, *The World Viewed* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1979), 24.

3 For a compelling discussion of the problem of privileging visibility as all that is admissible as the limit of humanistic inquiry, see section 6 of D. N. Rodowick, *Philosophy's Artful Conversation* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2015), 61–69.

4 Martin Heidegger, *Being and Time*, trans. Joan Stanbaugh (Albany: SUNY Press, 1996), 232.

5 Jacques Derrida, *Aporias*, trans. Thomas Dutoit (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1993), 21.

6 Maurice Blanchot, *The Infinite Conversation*, trans. Susan Hanson (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1993), 43.

7 Blanchot, *Infinite Conversation*, 41–42.

8 Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, 3rd ed., trans. G. E. M. Anscombe (New York: Macmillan, 1968), 193.

9 Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, 208.

10 Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, 209.

11 One way out of this problem of the forgetting of the aspectual in the aspect, a way of describing Wittgenstein's notion of experience, is to be found in Davide Panagia's idea of "the aspectual interface," which he puts forward in "The Notion of Pantry: A Speculative Defense of Unuse," *World Picture* 6 (winter 2011), http://www.worldpicturejournal.com/WP_6/Panagia.html.

12 It is worth considering here what Blanchot's conception of the empty frame shares with Heidegger's notion of enframing (*ge-stell*), particularly as the concept is articulated in "The Question Concerning Technology," published just a few years before *The Infinite Conversation*. Both the empty frame and the act of enframing describe the coordination of observable aspects of phenomena in a relation of accordance, such that what comes to accord will remain in accordance with itself. For Heidegger, enframing "is the way in which the real reveals itself as standing-reserve" (23). If the real is a standing-reserve it is not to be understood as something that might be otherwise; what stands in reserve are aspects of phenomena that have been ordered in a particular way for a use that has already been destined, or instrumentalized, by the way in which the aspects of phenomena have been ordered. What lies in wait already has a function. Or as he puts it, "Enframing is the gathering together that belongs to that setting upon-upon, which sets upon man and puts him in position to reveal the real, in the mode of ordering, as standing-reserve. As the one who is challenged forth in this way, man stands within the essential realm of Enframing. He can never take up a relation to it only subsequently" (24).

If man cannot take up a subsequent relation to what has been enframed, then at least two things are at stake. What man challenges forth—say, natural gas from shale—cannot be returned, nor lived with in a relation different than the one imagined and then made. It is not that what comes to presence does so in a state

of necessity; rather, it is destined, Heidegger suggested, by man, not by anything metaphysical. What appears real—what, in Heidegger's terms, comes to presence as something real—is what is challenged forth by man, who will be included in what is real and thus in what stands in reserve: what waits as real, which now only means something to be used. In this way, man is co-responsible for what comes to presence as standing-reserve, insofar as man starts "something on its way to arrival." Enframing, Heidegger insisted, was nothing technological; however, technology finalizes a relation between matter, aspect, and use in ways that appear necessary because irreversible. Thus, in terms of our discussion here, the inevitability of what stands in reserve, I would argue, leaves the human in a nonvoluntary relation that was established nevertheless voluntarily. In this way, regret could never follow from enframing, from an act of challenging forth in a way that cannot be reversed, at least not in the way that I imagine it. Martin Heidegger, *The Question Concerning Technology and Other Essays*, trans. William Lovitt (New York: Harper & Row, 1977), 3–35.

13 In some respects, what I am saying here is not so far from Judith Butler's understanding of the frame as something that breaks at the moment in which it also seeks to contain what it shows for the sake of iterability. Or as she puts it, "The frame that seeks to contain, convey, and determine what is seen (and sometimes, for a stretch, succeeds in doing precisely that) depends upon the conditions of reproducibility in order to succeed. And yet, this very reproducibility entails a breaking from context, a constant delimitation of new context, which means that the 'frame' does not quite contain what it conveys, but breaks apart every time it seeks to give definitive organization to its content. In other words, the frame does not hold anything together in one place. As the frame constantly breaks from its context, this self-breaking becomes part of the very definition."

The presence of Cora's lawyer in this particular frame—the one in which he remains silent—indicates most strongly the break that has not happened yet but will, so much so that Cora's lawyer will come to determine the thematic arrangement of the frame, of what remains aspectual in it as a new order of the possible. Judith Butler, *Frames of War: When Is Life Grievable?* (New York: Verso, 2016), 11.

14 As a medium predicated on the relation of frames, cinema provides numerous examples of this way of thinking of an empty frame as an expanded field of the possible. Consider, for example, a scene from *The Campaign* (dir. Jay Roach, 2013), in which a senatorial candidate from Hammond, South Carolina, is featured in a long shot, sitting screen left across from his wife, who is featured screen right. The scene involves a conversation between the couple, in which they will try to reckon with what will become of them and also his campaign now that the wife has been exposed in the media as having had an affair with her husband's political rival. At the end of the scene, the camera stays in place but refocuses such that we can see, in the rear plane of the image—and in between the couple trying to decide whether the husband must carry on with his cam-

paign, the husband's political advisor—the one who decided what it is possible to say, and to do, and who was always there in the frame, even if not always seen.

15 Theodor Adorno, *Negative Dialectics*, trans. E. B. Ashton (New York: Continuum, 1973), 57.

16 What I am saying here brushes up against Ernesto Laclau's conception of hegemony and the contingent articulation of the social through the establishment of an equivalential relation, whereby our differences are de-emphasized for the sake of what we might share as a lack that needs to be rectified in the social as it currently exists. The primary difference that I want to introduce here between a thematic conception of perception (or the possible as a mode of seeing and thus being) and a hegemonic conception of the social, in Laclau's terms, is that for Laclau the popular—as what comes by way of an equivalential relation—is something that has to be shared by many who nevertheless retain all of their differences as differences; difference is merely de-emphasized. In terms of my argument, the possible—especially as it is served by advice—draws in many but only ever includes one. The seer is a leader who leads only himself, even if he does so through others. Laclau's conception of hegemony might appeal equally to forms of political belief with which we will never agree or else that we find fascistic. But what remains emancipatory in Laclau's conception of hegemony and regardless of how it is put to use is that difference always remains present in de-emphasized form as a sign of the contingency of the social and thus as a promise that this particular version of things can be otherwise. See Ernesto Laclau, *On Populist Reason* (London: Verso, 2007).

17 Martin Heidegger, *Early Greek Thinking*, trans. and ed. David Farrell Krell and Frank A. Capuzzi (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1975), 34.

18 I have chosen the academic mentor as the figure of the advisor largely because we regularly assume that the relationship between mentor and mentee is predicated on a feeling of altruism. But for the larger stakes of my argument, it is important to note that an advisor is also, in much less specified institutional terms, a bureaucrat. And as I argued in chapter 1, the role or character of a bureaucrat is in no way structurally determined. The bureaucrat can offer, in good faith, flexible ways of finding one's way around an institution. He/she can also express the stubborn will of an administrative order as an expression of transparency in the representation of administrative inflexibility. Or he/she can produce a series of obfuscations precisely as a way of protecting the ethos and function of an administration's desired relation to the institution it manages. And because an institution, its bureaucracy, and its bureaucrats are not bound by a relation that is structurally determined, or forged in necessity, an advisor/bureaucrat's intention—in such an institutional framework—cannot plainly *and* consistently be known, negatively or positively.

19 Alexander García Düttmann, *Philosophy of Exaggeration*, trans. James Phillips (New York: Continuum, 2007), 36.

20 This is, of course, the major intervention made by Marcel Mauss in his influen-

tial study *The Gift*, which first appeared in 1954. See Marcel Mauss, *The Gift: The Form and Reason for Exchange in Archaic Societies*, trans. W. D. Halls (New York: W. W. Norton, 2000). The fundamental irony of *The Gift* is that every subsequent theorization of the gift must acknowledge, in some way, its debt to Mauss. The most radical of all, to my way of thinking—and no less so for being obligated, still—is Jacques Derrida's *Given Time: I. Counterfeit Money*, trans. Peggy Kamuf (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992). I will deal with that text just ahead. See also Jean-Luc Marion, *Being Given: Toward a Phenomenology of Givenness*, trans. Jeffrey L. Kosky (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2002); Marcel Hénaff, *The Price of Truth: Gift, Money, and Philosophy*, trans. Jean-Louis Morhange (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2010); Maurice Godelier, *The Enigma of the Gift*, trans. Nora Scott (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1999); and for a wider survey, Alan D. Schrift, ed., *The Logic of the Gift: Toward an Ethic of Generosity* (London: Routledge, 1997), among many others.

21 Marion, *Being Given*, 79.

22 Derrida, *Given Time*, 50–51.

23 In the context of the gift, the very idea of "being free," or of freedom itself, is nested in a fiduciary logic, insofar as obtaining my freedom means getting something for free. The only way to be free is to get something for free, and yet getting something for free typically means receiving a gift.

24 Derrida, *Given Time*, 52.

25 Derrida, *Given Time*, 23.

26 A much less generous reading of what Derrida proposes here as the impossible gift, or the "aneconomical relation," is offered by Marcel Hénaff in his essay "The Aporia of Pure Giving and the Aim of Reciprocity: On Derrida's *Given Time*." There, Hénaff notes the way that "the impossible" moves for Derrida in *Given Time* between the adjectival and noun form. If or when a noun, Hénaff reasons, "the noun would be the equivalent of a definition and, if this were the case, would be identifiable as the *thinkable*. However, the adjective constitutes a statement of existence (something either takes place or does not); the noun concerns the statement of what is logically acceptable (and therefore thinkable), but in this case gift-giving 'gives itself to be thought' as what would be contradictory par excellence, according to the inconceivable equation A = not A." Second, if gift giving is "the very figure of the impossible," then as a concept it "constitutes aporia par excellence: not just any aporia but the aporia, its 'very figure' and therefore absolute aporia" (216).

Of course, Hénaff's concern that Derrida's conception of the impossible defies reason, insofar as it asks us to believe that A = not A, misses, in certain respects, the very point of deconstruction, which is to dethrone reason in the very work that it does to show the impossibility of the possible, or the possibility of the impossible; this is what I would like to grant to Derrida here, even if I prefer something else. One would have to believe very strongly that A is itself beyond representation or representability—that "A" is not just one aspect, that

it is in fact or essence, *A*. If so, the formula A = not A could only stand as, or in, itself and never "for" the impossibility of Derrida's argument. See Marcel Hénaff, "The Aporia of Pure Giving and the Aim of Reciprocity: On Derrida's *Given Time*," trans. Jean-Louis Morhange, in *Derrida and the Time of the Political*, ed. Pheng Cheah and Suzanne Geurlac (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2009), 215–234.

27 Derrida, *Given Time*, 162. The emphasis is Derrida's.

28 Derrida, *Given Time*, 23.

29 For instance, Randy Martin, *Financialization of Daily Life* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2002); Christian Marazzi, *The Violence of Financial Capitalism*, trans. Kristina Lebedeva and Jason Francis McGimsey (New York: Semiotext(e), 2011); Maurizzio Lazzarato, *The Making of the Indebted Man: An Essay on the Neoliberal Condition*, trans. Joshua David Jordan (New York: Semiotext(e), 2012).

30 Linda M. Zerilli, *Feminism and the Abyss of Freedom* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005), 42.

31 Stanley Cavell, *Must We Mean What We Say?* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 242.

32 Cavell, *Must We Mean What We Say?*, 52.

33 Cavell, *Must We Mean What We Say?*, 256–257. I am in no sense the first to register the political dimension of Cavell's distinction. See, for instance, Zerilli, *Feminism and the Abyss of Freedom*, especially chapters 1 and 3.

34 The line "You know more than I know" comes from a John Cale song of the same name, which is also its chorus. From John Cale, *Fear* (Island Records, 1974).

35 Derrida, *Given Time*, 168.

CHAPTER THREE: THE PROBLEM OF WITHDRAWAL

1 Chantal Mouffe, *On the Political* (London: Routledge, 2005), 20.

2 Chantal Mouffe, *Agonistics: Thinking the World Politically* (London: Verso, 2013), 7.

3 Mouffe, *Agonistics*.

4 Aletta Norval, *Aversive Democracy: Inheritance and Originality in the Democratic Tradition* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 159. Emphases are Norval's.

5 Norval, *Aversive Democracy*, 118.

6 I argue this point more fully in my essay "Aesthetic Inequality and Political Seriousness," *World Picture* 9 (2014), http://worldpicturejournal.com/WP_9/Price.html.

7 Stanley Cavell, *Cavell on Film*, ed. William Rothman (Albany: SUNY Press, 2005), 226.

8 Cavell, *Cavell on Film*, 233.

9 Cavell, *Cavell on Film*, 235.

10 Cavell, *Cavell on Film*, 232.

11 Richard Rorty, "Getting Rid of the Appearance-Reality Distinction," *New Literary History* 47, no. 1 (winter 2016): 69.

12 Cavell, *Cavell on Film*, 236.

13 Cavell, *Cavell on Film*, 237.

14 Cavell, *Cavell on Film*.

15 G. W. F. Hegel, *Phenomenology of Spirit*, trans. A. V. Miller (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1977), 237.

16 Martin Heidegger, *What Is Called Thinking?* trans. J. Glenn Gray (New York: Harper Perennial, 1976), 34.

17 I have in mind, here, the way in which Weber speaks of "legal authority" in section III of *The Theory of Social and Economic Organization*. See Max Weber, *The Theory of Social and Economic Organization*, trans. A.M. Henderson and Talcott Parsons (New York: The Free Press, 1947).

18 Heidegger, *What Is Called Thinking?*, 9.

19 Heidegger, *What Is Called Thinking?*, 9.

20 I am in full sympathy, here, with Davide Panagia's suggestion that "wrong is a political category, not an epistemological one." This leads Panagia to describe, in an importantly nuanced way, the problem of linking value to necessary states:

> My polemical provocation is simply this: both left and right political ambitions have dispensed with the possibility of speculating the otherwiseness of value; that is, both the left and the right (in differing ways) adopt and endorse a conception of value that is at once moral, epistemic, and econometric: it is moral because it relies on criteria for the assignment of good and bad value as the first task of critical judgment; it is epistemic because it treats all political claims as knowledge-bearing entities that must be examined as either true or false before they may count as political claims at all; and it is econometric because the assignation of good and bad value marries the logic of production and exchange. The result is a confrontational stalemate that produces an implicit prohibition for speculating the otherwise of value.

In many respects, what I am asking here is very similar to what Panagia proposes. If Panagia is concerned to indicate how the left and the right remain united on the basis of a conviction to first principles, I am interested to show a similar problem between bureaucrats and their self-identified enemies. There's no risk of being wrong in epistemological terms, only in political ones, which can always be otherwise than they are now. See Davide Panagia, "The Notion of Pantry: A Speculative Defense of Unuse," *World Picture* 6 (winter 2011), http://worldpicturejournal.com/WP_6/Panagia.html.

21 G. W. F. Hegel, *The Philosophy of Right*, trans. Alan White (Newburyport, MA: Focus Publishing, 2002), 230.

22 Hegel, *The Philosophy of Right*, 232.

23 Hegel, *The Philosophy of Right*, 231.

24 Heidegger seems to have arrived at a similar if more obviously critical conclu-

sion in his seminar on Hegel's *Philosophy of Right*, which he gave in the winter of 1934/1935 at Freiburg. One of his notes from that seminar reads, "If one takes Hegel in terms of the philosophy of the state as a metaphysics of the bureaucratic state (the state is 'spirit'—because the officials are learned and scientifically educated), then everything becomes senseless—this is a mistaking of the essential motif of the Hegelian idea of the state with the 'facts.'" Heidegger, *On Hegel's Philosophy of Right: The 1934–35 Seminar and Interpretive Essays*, trans. Andrew J. Mitchell (London: Bloomsbury, 2014), 120.

25 Hegel, *The Philosophy of Right*, 231.

26 Claude Lefort, *The Political Forms of Modern Society: Bureaucracy, Democracy, Totalitarianism* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1986), 108. The italics are Lefort's.

27 Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *Kafka: Toward a Minor Literature*, trans. Dana Polan (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1986), 15.

28 Deleuze and Guattari, *Kafka*, 7–8.

29 Catherine Malabou, *What Should We Do with Our Brain?*, trans. Marc Jeannerod (New York: Fordham University Press, 2008), 35.

30 Malabou, *What Should We Do with Our Brain?*, 35.

31 Malabou, *What Should We Do with Our Brain?*, 79.

32 Henri Bergson, "Laughter," in *Comedy*, ed. Wylie Sypher (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1956), 73.

33 I develop this argument in much the same way as a response to the moralistic tones of iconoclasm in my essay "What Persists in Iconoclasm," *Third Rail* 2 (spring 2014): 6–9.

34 Online Etymology Dictionary, s.v. "hypocrisy," accessed March 13, 2015, http://www.etymonline.com/index.php?term=hypocrisy.

35 Hannah Arendt, *The Life of the Mind*, vol. 1 (New York: Harcourt, 1978), 36.

36 I develop this point in more pointedly cinematic terms in "The Displacement Project," *Discourse* 38.2 (spring 2016): 235–245.

37 Arendt, *Life of the Mind*, 39.

38 Arendt, *Life of the Mind*, 197.

39 Panagia, "Notion of Pantry."

AFTERTHOUGHTS

1 Of course, the complications of nostalgia far exceed the ordinary usage of the term. For two especially compelling conceptions of nostalgia, which inform my own thinking of regret, each in their own way, see Barbara Cassin, *La nostalgie: Quand donc est-on chez soi?* (Paris: Fayard, 2015), and Linda M. Austin, *Nostalgia in Transition, 1780–1917* (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2007).

2 Jean-Luc Nancy, "'What Is to Be Done?'" in Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe and Jean-Luc Nancy, *Retreating the Political*, ed. Simon Sparks (London: Routledge, 1997), 158.

3 Linda M. Zerilli, *Feminism and the Abyss of Freedom* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005), 38–39. The emphasis is mine.

4 For a more thorough interpretation of the film—one that very importantly indicates Weber's allegorical style as a break with convention and critical assumptions, see Paul Young, "*Hypocrites* and the Allegorical Mode of the Transitional Feature Film," *Cinema Journal* 55, no. 1 (winter 2015): 94–119.

5 Roland Barthes, *Roland Barthes by Roland Barthes*, trans. Richard Howard (New York: Noonday Press, 1977), 176.

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